

# VIRGIN SAINTS THE BENE- DICTINE ORDER

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# VIRGIN SAINTS

OF THE

# BENEDICTINE ORDER

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## PREFACE

It is now England's proud boast that her Empire is more extended than that of any other country, that her ships rule the waves, that her sons who people the uttermost ends of the earth still look to her as their mother, and that her progress and prosperity have never been surpassed. Yet there was a day when she could boast of something even greater than all this; a time when her sons and daughters were foremost in the ranks of the heroes and heroines of the Kingdom of Heaven who have won for themselves immortal glory and unfading crowns. As we look back at the history of this country in the days when England was winning for herself the title of Island of the Saints, and as we run our eyes down the long list of those special friends of God whose names have come down to us, we notice that by far the greater number were sanctified by the Rule of St. Benedict. That Rule is no antiquated legislation, fitted only for mediæval times. It is as practical and vivifying now as then; it has the same power of perfecting individuals and leavening nations, for its vitality rests on the promise of God. When our Divine Lord revealed to St. Benedict the future destruction of his monastery by the Lombards, He afterwards consoled him with four most comfortable promises: that his

Order should last to the end of the world and be of great service to the Church in the final battle ; that all who faithfully followed his Rule should be saved ; that all who were benefactors to his Order should be blessed by Heaven ; that all who persecuted it should die miserably.

Until the Reformation the Order was nowhere more flourishing or more productive of Saints than in England and Germany. Both countries owed the Faith to Benedictine Apostles, and with the suppression of the monasteries and the death or exile of the monks both countries lapsed again into spiritual darkness. But the Order only seemingly died down that it might spring up again the more gloriously, for as we daily see the number of monks and nuns increasing and multiplying, we may surely believe that they are destined to render great service to the Church in these latter days ; and as they were instrumental in planting the Faith, so they may be instrumental in restoring it. The work of the monks and their utility in the Church is more self-evident than that of the nuns, whose vocation to a hidden life is apt to be misunderstood in a Protestant country, where heresy has deadened in our hearts that instinct of the supernatural and that ready appreciation of divine things which our Catholic forefathers possessed.

It is with a view of illustrating somewhat the work done in the Church by contemplative nuns that these short sketches of Benedictine virgins have been compiled. If the Saints whose lives are here depicted were to return now and pick up the thread of life in one or other of the Benedictine monasteries in this country, they would find little real change from the observance which sanctified them hundreds of years ago. Human



nature is ever the same, and the concupiscence of the flesh and of the eyes and the pride of life need now as then the same antidotes of mortification, detachment, and lowliness. All are not called upon to exercise these virtues in the eminent degree incumbent on those who make profession of them in the religious state ; but the example of those who practise poverty, chastity, obedience, hiddenness, and contempt of the world to their utmost limits is the most efficacious means of bringing home to their fellow-Christians that these things, in some measure at least, are essential for all who aspire to attain to the Kingdom of Heaven.



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# ST. HILDA AND HER TIMES

(614-680)

THE extensive ruins of ancient abbeys still to be seen in Yorkshire mark it out to us as a very nursery of monasticism in this country. The names of Fountains, Bolton, Rievaulx, and Whitby are familiar to every scholar, while the relics which survive of those great monasteries, many of whose inmates played so prominent a part in our history, are eagerly visited year after year by hundreds of admiring tourists. Yet, as we gaze spell-bound at those vast monuments of Christian art, our thoughts go back to the time when those cloisters were peopled with happy, busy inmates; when from the great church now re-echoing with the cry of the rooks there rose daily to God that mighty song of praise, that strong cry for mercy on a sinful world, those transports of love and adoration which found expression in the unbounded riches of the monastic Liturgy.

Of the many thousands who for centuries peopled these cloisters, by far the greater number have passed from the memory of man; they have gone to form the living stones of the heavenly Jerusalem, after being fashioned and polished by the Divine Architect with the chisel of mortification and the refining influence of religious life. Yet, as we stand in those hallowed scenes, there are many whose names recur to our minds with a sense of pride and gratitude—"our fathers in their generation, men of renown, whose goodly deeds have not failed." That a bishop like

Aidan, or a reformer like Wilfrid, or even a simple monk like Bede, with the wondrous influence of his pen, should have left their mark in history and endeared themselves to us is, after all, not so strange. But it is certainly very remarkable that the name of a woman who never ruled a kingdom, or wrote books, or did anything particularly striking, should have survived all these centuries. God surely means that St. Hilda should be a pattern to us, in these days of "progress," of what a strong woman ought to be in the Christian sense of the word. The Anglo-Saxon Saints of her period stand out before us very forcibly as perfect types of the valiant woman who "put forth her hand to strong things." They were never masculine, nor forgetful that the chief ornament of a woman is womanliness; yet at the same time we find in them no trace of feminine weakness, pusillanimity or sentiment. They had a work to do, and they did it with a strength of purpose and a determination which carried all before it. "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away."

St. Hilda was of the royal race of Aella, and was born in stormy times. Aella was that king of the Northumbrians to whom St. Gregory had at first intended to carry the light of faith on seeing the Saxon slaves in the market. He had inquired the name of their king, and, making a play on the word, he exclaimed, "Alleluia shall soon be sung in Aella's kingdom." Dying in 589, Aella left a little son three years old, named Edwin. Ethelfred the Cruel, who had so savagely murdered the monks of Bangor, usurped the throne of his defenceless nephew. Though he hated Edwin, he dared not murder him outright, fearing a revolution, for the Northumbrians loved the child; but after he had grown to man's estate, not being able any longer to bear the sight of him, Ethelfred exiled him, on pretence of a crime imputed to him, hoping that he would die of poverty and want. At the same time Hereric, probably Edwin's younger brother (the exact relationship is disputed), also took to flight, fearing Ethelfred's vengeance, he being next heir to the throne in case of Edwin's demise. Hereric took

with him in his flight his beautiful young wife, the Lady Breguswith, and their only child, Hereswida, who was Hilda's elder sister. While her parents were in exile Hilda was born; and Venerable Bede tells us how, before her birth, her mother had a wonderful dream, in which it seemed to her that she had lost her husband, and as she was seeking everywhere for him she lifted her garment and there found so precious a jewel that the beams which issued from it shone throughout Britain. This dream was truly fulfilled, for her husband, pursued by Ethelfred's spies, was by them cruelly murdered; but to console her for her loss God gave to her a daughter whose life afforded an example of light and holiness to so many of her fellow-countrymen. It was probably on account of this prophetic dream that the name Hilda, which means light, was bestowed on the child.

Meantime Edwin had been more fortunate than his brother; and after many adventures, and disguised as a peasant, he at length reached the court of Redwald, king of Essex, of whom he implored an asylum from the pursuit of his cruel uncle. Redwald received him with all the honour due to a dethroned prince, and treated him with royal hospitality. Edwin endeared himself to all by his rare qualities and his talents in literary pursuits and martial exercises. However, Ethelfred soon discovered his retreat, and sent ambassadors to Redwald with a great sum of money to buy the fugitive, and when the bribe was generously rejected threatened to make war upon him. This threat shook Redwald's courage for the moment, and he began to negotiate with the tyrant, choosing rather to expose the life of a stranger than to lose his whole kingdom. These negotiations came to Edwin's ear, and he was advised by his friends to take to flight again; but he was tired of wandering like a homeless vagabond, and he said that after experiencing Redwald's generosity for so long he would not be the first to suspect so mean a treachery in so great a king. Yet he was naturally much disturbed by the rumour, and was far too anxious to think of sleep that night. He therefore went out into the cool of the evening, and there

abandoning himself to his thoughts, considered rather how he could die nobly than how he could save his life. As he mused, a stranger accosted him and entered into conversation with him. Bede thinks he was an angel, but at least he was a messenger endowed with the spirit of prophecy. "My son," he began, "you have indeed great cause to be grieved and to stand in fear of Redwald, who is resolved on your ruin. But what reward would you give to one who restored you to your former place in this king's friendship?" Edwin answered that any adequate recompense would be beyond his power. "What reward," continued the other, "would you give to him who should, moreover, make you stronger than your enemy and possessor of his crown?" To which Edwin replied that he could only promise a grateful heart. "But what," concluded the messenger, "would you do for him who will not only make you happy and glorious in this world, but after this life will procure for you immortal glory? Will you not at least afford him your attention and submission when he shall propose to you holy and good counsels?" This Edwin readily promised, and the stranger, laying his hand on his head, said to him, "When hereafter you shall see a man's hand thus laid upon your head, and all the things which I have foretold accomplished, then be sure to remember the promise you have made." Saying this, he vanished, leaving Edwin in an uncertainty between hope and fear.

Two of the prophecies were speedily fulfilled, for Redwald, urged by the entreaties of his wife, broke off the negotiations, repenting of his treachery. War was declared, and a decisive battle was fought, in which the tyrant, being too confident of his own powers, rushed blindly upon his foes, and, being separated from his followers, was slain; an end, says the chronicler, which his ambition richly deserved.

Edwin was now hailed as the rightful king of Northumbria. He was then twenty-seven years old. On his restoration he recalled his exiled relatives, and among them his niece, St. Hilda. In the course of his wanderings he had seen the princess Ethelburga, daughter of Ethelbert, king of Kent, who had been converted by St. Augustine. Being



“ravished by her beauty,” he bethought himself of her when safely seated on his throne, and sent ambassadors to seek her hand. But the royal maiden had St. Augustine for her spiritual father, who, says Bede, had instilled into her a deep sense of Christianity; therefore she refused to hearken to the proposals of a pagan king, and answered that it was not lawful for a Christian maiden to be married to a pagan, for fear lest the faith and Sacraments of the celestial King should be profaned by so near an association with a monarch who was ignorant of the worship due to the true God.

Edwin, however, nothing daunted, replied that he would never do the least thing contrary to the Christian faith, and would allow Ethelburga and all her retinue the free exercise of their religion. He further declared that if, after due examination, he found the Christian religion more holy and more befitting the majesty of God than that in which he had been brought up, he would himself embrace it. So favourable an offer could not be refused, and Ethelburga saw that she might be the means of converting the Northumbrian nation to the true faith. She therefore set out, accompanied by St. Paulinus, one of the monks sent by St. Gregory to England, a man well fitted to be her spiritual guide and adviser in her difficult mission. In order to give him more power and authority he was consecrated first Bishop of York, previous to his departure. Paulinus blessed the marriage of Edwin and Ethelburga amid great rejoicing, and Pope Boniface sent letters of congratulation and exhortation to the bride and bridegroom, together with a silver mirror and an ivory and gold comb as tokens of good-will to the bride. These last were discovered at Whitby in 1872, having most likely been given by Ethelburga to the Abbess Hilda, her niece. Hilda, who lived with her uncle and aunt, was thus thrown into contact with St. Paulinus, and was by him gradually won over to the Christian faith. In the year 627 she was solemnly baptised with the king and a great number of nobles, the ceremony taking place on the holy feast of Easter, with all possible pomp and splendour.

King Edwin had hesitated some time before submitting his neck to the sweet yoke of Christ. Venerable Bede says of him, that he was a "man of a piercing, sagacious spirit, who would oftentimes sit alone, revolving in his mind many doubtful thoughts as to what resolution he should take and what religion he should adopt." He was dissatisfied with his own superstition, yet his principal objection to the Catholic faith was that he thought it unbecoming a great king to submit to be the follower of one who had been crucified. However, one day as he was thus musing, the third prophecy formerly made to him was suddenly fulfilled, for St. Paulinus, breaking in on his reveries, laid his hand on his head as the stranger had foretold, and asked him whether he remembered the promise he had made as an exile in danger of death, and whether he did not fear to continue longer in opposition to the God who had so exalted him and could as easily confound him. Edwin was convinced and, acknowledging his want of trust in his deliverer, promised to do whatever St. Paulinus should command him. His doubts and objections vanished, and he promised not only to become a follower of Christ himself, but to use all means to bring the people of his nation to the knowledge of the truth. This he succeeded in doing by means of a great national council summoned for the purpose, Coifi, the chief of the idolatrous priests, being the first to declare himself a Christian.

In 633, six years after Edwin's baptism, he went to receive the eternal crown promised to him by the divine oracle. He was killed in a holy war against the pagan king Penda and his ally, Cadwallon, who, in their hatred of Christianity had put to death so many innocent victims. The queen Ethelburga fled, under Paulinus's protection, to her home in Kent, Hilda probably accompanying her; and under an idolatrous ruler, Christianity, which was but just beginning to take root in Northumbria, was almost entirely destroyed. James the Deacon alone, tried to keep alive a feeble spark until the day when Aidan was to come and again fan it into a flame; a flame never more to be extin-

guished, for even in the darkest days of persecution the faith was always kept alive in the North, and in at least one chapel the sanctuary lamp has ever remained burning to testify to the belief of the faithful few in the real presence of their God in the Sacrament of His love.

The year that intervened between St. Edwin's death and the accession of St. Oswald was called by the Northumbrians the "accursed year," such chaos prevailed under a pagan government. However, at length St. Oswald, a nephew of Edwin, who had taken refuge in Scotland, trusting in God's help, attacked and overthrew the tyrant and became king of Northumbria. Peace was restored and the exiles returned once more to their homes in the North, Hilda being then twenty-one years old.

Oswald's first care was to apply to the Scottish monks of Iona, with whom he had become acquainted during his banishment, for missionaries to re-ignite the faith among his people. The first monk sent in answer to his appeal was somewhat harsh and severe, and could not adapt himself to the Saxons, whom he considered a hopeless race, and he therefore returned to his monastery. Then the gentle Aidan, whose heart bled for the lost sheep wandering shepherdless over the wilds of Northumbria, begged to go in his stead to endeavour to tame their rough natures and to win them to Christ. His mission was wholly successful; he endeared himself to all, especially to the king, who accompanied him everywhere, acting as his interpreter, for at first Aidan knew but little English. It was during his frequent sojourns at the Northumbrian court that St. Aidan formed a friendship with St. Hilda, whom he began to lead to God along the strait and difficult paths of perfection. Venerable Bede describes him as a man of piety, meekness and moderation—a rare quality in those days—yet with an unbounded zeal for God's glory. He adds that the two points which most appealed to those whom he sought to convert were that he never taught anything that he did not himself practise, and that he had no affection for the honours and pleasures of the world. Whether in his cell or at court, he was always the same

simple monk. The influence which he won over others by his unobtrusive virtue was very great, and numbers put themselves under his direction. As an instance of the power of his example we read that, in imitation of him, many religious men and women prolonged their fast until three o'clock in the afternoon on Wednesdays and Fridays. Yet, notwithstanding the natural sweetness and gentleness of his character, Aidan was no respecter of persons, nor did he shrink from speaking out boldly against the deplorable vices then prevalent among the Saxon nobility. By this he would have won the admiration of Hilda, whose strong and unflinching nature was capable of appreciating the fearless courage of the Scottish monk in telling the truth to those fierce northern chieftains. Although she was thirty-three years old before she finally consecrated herself to God, her resolution to become a nun had been fixed long before, but the unsettled state of the country and the many troubles through which her relations had to pass prevented her from sooner carrying out her purpose.

Father Faber says: "To be a princess in England in the seventh century was only to be the more liable to a disturbed life than the humbler ranks of the people, and that exile, deposition and murder were the foremost retinue of a king and his family; that of all the members of the royal household the princesses were in the most unfavourable position, for they were looked upon as a means of extending and consolidating power by being given in marriage to other princes. Thus, if a royal maiden wished to dedicate herself to holy virginity, she became at once useless to her family." But Hilda, sought in marriage as she must have been, not only on account of her position, but also of her extraordinary beauty and talents, remained firm in her resolve awaiting God's own time, having determined, as soon as opportunity offered, to cross to France and take the veil in the Abbey of Chelles, where her widowed sister had already retired, to devote the remainder of her life to God. Of Hereswida we have the following testimony in the Gallican Martyrology: "In the monastery

of Chelles in the territory of Paris, on September 20th, is celebrated the memory of St. Hereswida. She, being a queen in England, out of love to Christ forsook her sceptre and kingdom, and betook herself to the said famous monastery, where, after she had afforded admirable examples of piety, humility, and regular observance, she was consummated with a happy end and obtained the reward of a heavenly crown."

Meantime there had been sad doings at the Northumbrian court: the good and great king Oswald had been slain by that arch-enemy of the Christian faith, Penda. Some time previous to his death a terrible pestilence had ravaged the kingdom, which must have given ample scope to the Princess Hilda to exercise many works of mercy. The chronicler quaintly remarks that king Oswald was pierced to the soul at seeing such a world of funerals, and that he earnestly prayed God, as king David had done, to spare his people, and to turn the scourge against himself and his family. This prayer was granted, for soon after Oswald was seized with the plague and brought to the point of death. As he lay on what seemed to be his death-bed, rejoicing to die as a victim for the salvation of his nation, three angels appeared to him and addressed him, saying: "O king, thy prayers and resignation are acceptable to God. Thou art one of ours, for shortly thou shalt receive an immortal crown for thy faith, piety, and charity. But that time is not yet come, for God at present gives thee both thy own life and that of thy subjects. Now thou art willing to die for them, shortly thou shalt die far more happily, a martyr for God." This prediction was verified on August 5, 642, when the holy king was slain, praying for his people with his dying breath.

After the death of Oswald, his brother Oswy succeeded him, a young man of about thirty, who reigned twenty-eight years. He divided his kingdom with Oswin, a descendant of the royal race of Aella, and a kinsman of Hilda, giving him the kingdom of Deira. It is probable that Hilda remained at Oswin's court during the last five years spent by her in the world. In 647, all obstacles

having been surmounted, she left the court and waited on the coast for a vessel to carry her to France to join her sister. In thus forsaking her country, as well as her family and friends, she sought to make her sacrifice the more complete. However, Aidan had formed other plans for her, and when he heard of her departure he sent to urge her to return to him, for he had destined her to foster the little seed of religious life which, by means of another holy soul, he had already planted at Hartlepool.

Hilda, moved by his entreaties, consented to forego her long-cherished plan, and, returning to Northumbria, Aidan gave her a small estate, just sufficient to support herself and a few companions, on the banks of the river Wear. One cannot but be struck at the literal way in which Hilda took our Lord's words about leaving all things, since it is evident from the fact that St. Aidan gave her this estate to support her, that she must have left the court dowerless, and this by her own desire. This little side-light which we get of her character speaks volumes for the whole-heartedness of her sacrifice and the thoroughness of her resolve. Not far from St. Hilda's small convent was that established by St. Bees, at Hartlepool, on the coast of Durham, the first convent ever seen in Northumbria. Tradition says that she was an Irish princess who had vowed her virginity to God, and, as a pledge of her vow, had received from an angel a bracelet marked with a cross; as he gave it to her he said: "Receive this blessed gift, sent to you by God, by which you may know that you are dedicated to His service, and that He is your Spouse." Being considered the most beautiful maiden in the land, she was sought in marriage by the king of Norway, who came in person to fetch her. The night before the wedding there was a great feast, and while all were drinking and making merry, she seized the opportunity to escape, and, embarking on a ship she chanced to find ready to set sail, she passed over to Northumbria, where for many years she lived in solitude not far from Whitehaven, doing good to the poor people around, nursing and tending them in sickness, and teaching them the healing arts.

After a time the place was infested by pirates, and St. Bees was obliged again to take to flight, this time settling at Hartlepool. Here she was found by St. Aidan in the course of his apostolic labours, and at once placed herself under his direction. By his advice she adopted a fixed rule, which he gave her, together with the veil and habit of a consecrated virgin. Other young maidens, attracted by her example and holy life, sought to share her retreat, and Aidan urged her to undertake their training. For this it was necessary to have some sort of convent built, in which they could live and keep regular observance. As she was not herself able to lift the stones and set them up, she got men from the neighbourhood to do the work, she meanwhile helping them by every means in her power, carrying the mortar for them, cooking their dinner, and ministering to all their little wants. Thus the building grew apace, and soon was filled with fervent souls eager to imitate the virtues of one who had so long schooled herself in their practice, and who had learnt to tame and subdue those strong passions which they felt so unruly in their own hearts. Still, St. Bees was only known to a few; none guessed her origin, for the humble virgin would have been the last to spread abroad the fact that she was of royal blood. With Hilda the case was very different, she was well known in Northumbria, and when people heard that she had retired to a remote village with a few other maidens in order to dedicate herself to religious life, they were lavish of criticism, and not a little curious about the matter. Religious life for women was absolutely new to the Northumbrians, so we can easily imagine the sinister prophecies made as to the outcome of Hilda's venture. In truth, it did seem a bold step for a princess, who had always lived in luxury, to go to a wild spot, unprotected, with scant provision and a poor shelter. Would she not soon grow weary of her hard life, of its monotony, its poverty, most of all, of its society? Would her health stand the test? These and similar queries would naturally have been uppermost, then as now, in the minds of the onlookers; yet days, weeks, and months, nay years, rolled by, and Hilda still remained unmoved in

her purpose, and proved by her living example that a heart on fire with love for God can surmount every difficulty, whether of body or mind. And as she had proved herself superior to the allurements of the world and the claims of nature, others began to ask themselves whether they could not do what she had done ; and so many came to join her and emulate her example.

There is an old proverb which says that "Small beginnings make great ends," and perhaps in no case is this more true than in the spiritual life. Hilda's beginnings were very small, her convent was so insignificant that not even its name has survived ; but the seed soon matured, and in a short time Hilda began to exercise that extraordinary influence which made itself felt on all classes throughout the kingdom. As was but natural, Hilda and Bees soon became fast friends ; Hilda learnt much from the long experience of Bees, while Bees saw in the strength of character of the Deiran Princess one who was born to rule and lead, and she therefore spared no pains in instilling into her a true religious spirit. Meanwhile St. Bees had secretly formed a plan which she now unfolded to St. Aidan. At his word, she had been willing to renounce the solitude which she loved in order to train up others in virtue and holy living ; she had undertaken without a murmur all the difficulties incumbent on a new foundation in a country where conventual life was unknown ; she had trained the wild Northumbrian maidens, and had succeeded in introducing regular observance into her convent. Now that she had made a difficult way easy, she felt that she would not be shirking her duty if she left another to reap where she had sown. She therefore begged St. Aidan to allow her to resign the reins of government into Hilda's hands, and to retire once more into solitude. At first Aidan would not hear of such a proposal ; he knew Hilda's worth, and appreciated her powers, yet he was by no means willing to lose St. Bees. However, the latter had recourse to prayer, and persisting in her request, she at length gained the day as far as St. Aidan was concerned, for he could not deny that Hilda was eminently qualified to govern, and



that her position would do much to propagate religious life in the kingdom.

But what did Hilda herself think of the plan? As the first element of holiness is humility, she could not for a moment have esteemed herself fitted to take the place of one whom she regarded as her superior in every way. When the exchange was suggested to her she would not even suffer the idea to be discussed and lovingly remonstrated with St. Bees, pleading her own inexperience and the need she still felt for her guidance. Nevertheless St. Bees had taken her resolve, and since she could not herself persuade Hilda, she enlisted the holy Bishop's help, and by his authority effected her purpose. When Aidan said that a thing must be, Hilda knew that she had to obey; and so with great reluctance she accepted the cross of superiority laid on her shoulders by holy obedience. All things having been finally settled St. Bees took her departure, deeply regretted by those who had been privileged to live under her rule, and went to a village called Tadcaster, some twelve miles from York, where she lived in great holiness. She continued, however, to take a lively interest in the community she had left, and especially in her successor, the Abbess Hilda, to whom she remained much attached, leaving her solitude every year to visit her. When Hilda was struck down with her last long illness we shall find Bees again at her side bringing her comfort and consolation by her presence.

Hilda was welcomed with great respect and cordiality by the nuns of Hartlepool. They had often seen her at their convent, and had been attracted to her at the outset; while they could not but marvel at the courage and fervour of this royal lady. Venerable Bede tells us how Hilda's nuns loved her with an intense love (*"immenso amore"*), and there must have been something very winning about her in order to account for the remarkable influence she exercised alike over men and women. As Abbess, she was most careful to maintain regular observance in every detail as she had been taught by St. Aidan and other religious men.

Bede goes on to tell us how she instilled into her nuns the perfect practice of piety and chastity and of all virtues, especially those of peace and charity. He lays stress on these last, for to keep peace and charity between these untrained and independent natures required almost a miracle of grace. It would have been easier to have made hermits of them and to teach them to do heroic penance, than to live together in peace and union. According to the practice of the primitive Church, Hilda exacted rigorous poverty; no distinction was made between rich and poor, all things were common to all, and no one was allowed to exercise any proprietorship. This was, perhaps, not quite so great a hardship as might appear at first sight, for in those times the households, even of the Court and nobles, were accustomed to live in common, all, masters, servants, and serfs; meeting in the large hall of the castle or manor for meals and work. The walls of these halls were of rough masonry, except at the higher end, where the nobles and their families sat, and this was hung with tapestry worked by the deft fingers of noble ladies and their maidens, who also spun and wove the garments for the entire household, nobles and peasants all sharing alike, the only difference being in the richness of the weaving.

But if this life in common was natural to them, the Christian virtues of submission, patience and charity were absent from the minds of the haughty and proud Saxon nobles who were accustomed to treat their dependants with harshness and cruelty, forgetting that God is no excepter of persons and that, whether bond or free, all are one in His sight. Hilda's own convent was the first founded in northern England, so that those who presented themselves could not—to use a homely phrase—have known what they were in for, and Hilda must have exercised consummate prudence and tact to instil into such unsubdued minds a true monastic spirit and religious sentiments. The difficulties she must have encountered are confirmed by the fact that later on at Whitby she found it necessary to separate completely the novices from the professed, so that they even lived in a separate house. Not until they had been

thoroughly moulded, tried and purified, were they allowed to join those who had learnt to bear the yoke of Christ in meekness and humility.

It is probable that the nuns of Hartlepool had many opportunities of showing hospitality to poor and shipwrecked mariners, as on that coast wrecks were, and still unfortunately are, very common occurrences. The fishing people who lived around would also come to them for help and comfort, both in their temporal and spiritual needs, and grew to love the Abbess and her community, and to regard them with honest pride as being in a sense their property. Hilda herself, no doubt, regarded Hartlepool as her permanent home, and had no thoughts of moving. However, God had other designs for her and destined her to possess more widespread influence for His greater glory. The change was brought about by a providential circumstance. The restless Penda saw with jealousy the peace that reigned in Northumbria and determined once again to put an end to it. "Oswy," says Bede, who "had already received intolerable vexations from him, sought still to buy him off with bribes." Penda, however, would listen to no terms, and Oswy had recourse to God, saying: "Since the pagan king refuses our gifts let us offer them to our Lord God, who will graciously accept them." He therefore vowed that in the event of victory he would consecrate his daughter to God in holy religion, and give twelve estates for the foundation and endowment of a monastery. God accepted his vow, and, in spite of tremendous odds against him, Oswy obtained a victory little short of miraculous and slew the cruel tyrant. Mindful of his vow, Oswy did not forget to whom he owed the victory, and, not less faithful than Jephthe, he hastened to fulfil it. His daughter Elfreda was but a babe of scarce a year old, yet, taking her as a fair blossom in all her purity and innocence, he offered her to God in the convent of St. Hilda at Hartlepool, leaving her to be fostered and trained as a chaste bride for the celestial Spouse to whom she was vowed.

This act of sacrifice was, however, only a portion of the

vow, and Oswy called a council to deliberate upon a suitable site to build the abbey, which was to serve as a perpetual memorial of thanksgiving for the signal grace received. The council unanimously agreed that Streaneshalch (the Isle of Beacon), a platform rising some three hundred feet above the sea, was a most conspicuous and fitting spot to establish such a monument; and that on no community could it be more worthily bestowed than on that of the Princess Hilda. The Isle of Beacon was afterwards called Whitby by the Danes on account of the dazzling white cliffs standing out against the great dark rocks below. It was one of the crown lands, and in 630 King Edwin had caused a church to be built there in honour of St. Peter for the use of the fishermen. On the edge of the cliff was a watch-tower—hence the name, Isle of Beacon—to keep a look out for the approach of a hostile fleet and to serve as a danger signal to unwary navigators approaching the dangerous rocks by night.

Oswy signified his intentions to Hilda, who concurred in his decision, understanding that her removal would further the glory of God and the salvation of souls. The outline of a monastery was then begun on a princely scale, with a magnificent church. Hilda came constantly to the spot to superintend the building and to give the necessary directions to men, willing, no doubt, but probably unskilled in the erection of conventual establishments. At length, in 657, the buildings being sufficiently advanced, Hilda removed permanently to Whitby with ten of her nuns. It must have cost her a sharp pang to leave Hartlepool, to which she was bound by so many sacred ties. There her mother lay buried, having come to end her days in peace beneath her daughter's rule. In 1843, while some excavations were being made in the church at Hartlepool, some graves were discovered bearing Saxon names, among them that of the Lady Breguswith, Hilda's mother. Hartlepool was also associated with those memories of Aidan which Hilda cherished with such true fidelity that she would never swerve one iota from the rule and customs learned from this revered guide and teacher.

Some years before, she had had the grief of losing him; he had died August 31, 651. On the night of his death St. Cuthbert, then a shepherd, was watching his sheep on the downs near Melrose, when he saw the sky brilliantly lighted up and angels descending from heaven. As he gazed on, spell-bound, at the wondrous sight, he saw the same angel returning, bearing the soul of the holy bishop to paradise. The next morning he heard that St. Aidan had died at that same time; and from thenceforward he determined to embrace a monastic life, all earthly things having lost their attractions for eyes which had caught a glimpse of heavenly glory.

When Hilda arrived at Whitby and settled down there with her nuns, she found some very objectionable neighbours. The cliff, so long uninhabited, was infested by snakes and all kinds of creeping horrors. This unexpected pest was a great trial to the good nuns, who scarcely dared to go out for fear of finding a snake lurking in the long grass which grew abundantly in this dangerous spot. St. Hilda shared the dread of her sisters for these reptiles and besought God to deliver them from them. The Divine Master had compassion on His handmaids and, acceding to their petition, drove out the snakes by His almighty power; like the swine of the Gerasenes, they went over the cliff and were turned into stones on the shore beneath. This legend is still popular among the country-folk, who point out the stones on Whitby beach, which, to all appearance, bear the form of petrified snakes. At any rate, St. Hilda's prayers were not less efficacious than those of St. Patrick, for a snake was never again seen in the neighbourhood.

Her mission, however, was not only to rid the country of venomous reptiles that might injure the body but could not kill the soul, she had to expel a much older and more wily serpent, "the most subtle of all the beasts which God had made." The princely scale upon which the monastery had been built, the rich lands with which it was endowed, the prestige given to it by the presence of the king's little

daughter, and most of all, Hilda's extraordinary influence and power of organization and government, soon caused Whitby to become a centre of piety and learning, frequented by people of every rank and condition. Fuller says: "I behold Hilda as the most learned female before the Conquest, and I may call her the 'She Gamaliel,' at whose feet many learned men had their education." The surrounding peasants both loved and respected her, and it became the custom of the country to address her as "Mother," showing how in her great heart all found a place. Her superior counsel and gift of judgement were so highly esteemed that she was consulted as an oracle, not only by her neighbours, but also by bishops, learned men, the king, and the nobles; and, as Venerable Bede significantly adds, "they did not merely ask her advice, but they also followed it."

Whitby was not only an abbey for nuns, it was one of those great double monasteries of which several examples are found in England. Ely, Coldingham, and Wimbourne were all invariably governed by an abbess, and the reason is not difficult to conjecture. In those rough days, when a lady of distinction founded a monastery for the weaker sex it was very necessary that they should have protectors, and if these protectors could minister to their spiritual wants as well as guard them from the violence of the times, so much the better. It must be clearly borne in mind that the monks and nuns were absolutely separate; they never saw each other, nor held any communication with one another further than was required for their spiritual ministry. The abbess, in company with an elder nun, transacted the necessary business with the prior and officials and arranged for the general well-being of all. There were two distinct choirs for monks and nuns, in some cases two separate churches; the houses in which they lived were always apart. The prior was generally chosen by the abbess, and the monks took care of the estates of the monastery, instructed the people of the neighbourhood, and exercised the various mechanical arts, these last often in a very high degree of perfection. Abbots and bishops emulated the skill of their

inferiors by practising themselves in the arts of carpentering and working in metals, both iron and gold, all of which crafts they turned to the service of God, enriching their churches with the produce of their labours.

The nuns, in their turn, were not idle, though their work lay in a more retired and gentle sphere adapted to their sex. The gorgeous vestments and church hangings which they embroidered were celebrated in foreign lands, while they were not less skilled in illuminating and beautifying missals and prayer books. Lingard tells us how St. Wilfrid ordered the four Gospels to be written in letters of gold on a purple ground; most likely this work of art was executed by the nuns of Whitby; it was afterwards presented to the church of Ripon enclosed in a golden casket enriched with precious stones. The Saxons delighted in display, and well for them, when their love for the beautiful caused them to pour forth their riches in adorning the house of God and in giving to Him all that was best and most precious. We can scarcely credit the accounts we read of the church furniture of those days; and yet we never find that the poor suffered in consequence, or were less cared for because God's temples were sumptuously adorned. No, then as now, the same spirit of faith which makes men generous to God in His Sacramental Presence makes them equally open-handed in helping Him in the person of His poor. In Lingard's "Antiquities" we read that the altars were plated with silver and gold and inlaid with jewels, that the walls were hung with richest tapestry and foreign paintings, while everything employed in the sacred ministry was of silver or gold.

Among its many other claims to our admiration and wonder, the Abbey of Whitby stands pre-eminent for the high standard of its intellectual culture, and for the famous men it produced even in Hilda's lifetime. Bede tells us how "she took such care to make her subjects diligent in reading the Holy Scriptures and practising works of piety that there were many persons found there very fit to undertake the ecclesiastical degree and office of the altar." Of Hilda's own disciples five became bishops, the most cele-

brated being St. John of Beverley, who was the most popular saint of that period. Another striking personality among Hilda's subjects was the first Anglo-Saxon poet, the famous Cædmon, who, according to the old legend, received his talent from heaven. He was but a cowherd, and it grieved him that, while his fellow-labourers sang and made merry, he perforce remained silent, having no voice to sing. One evening he slipped away from his friends, sad and disquieted, and fell asleep in the stable. As he slept he heard a voice saying, "Sing to me," and he answered, "I cannot sing." Still the voice persisted, and Cædmon said, "What can I sing about? I know no song." To which the mysterious voice answered, "Sing about God and His creation, His power and His greatness." And immediately the poor cowherd began to sing verses about the glories of God and of nature which had never entered his mind before.

The miraculous talent he had acquired was naturally much talked about, and the Abbess Hilda, recognizing in him one gifted by God, received him into the service of the Abbey, together with all his family. Here he eventually took the habit and became a most holy monk, edifying all by the deep and tender piety which animated his songs and poems.

Of Cædmon Venerable Bede says that "he was a most religious man, who humbly subjected himself to regular discipline" (surely a rare virtue in a genius!), "and that though after him many Anglo-Saxons tried to compose verses, none equalled him, for he had received his talent from above, taught by God, not by men." As a monk he translated into Anglo-Saxon and put into verse a great part of the Bible, and composed marvellous verses about heaven and hell, death and judgement, the fall of the angels, and those great truths calculated to make men realize the vanity of temporal things, and to aspire after something greater and better. Many, induced by his verses, left their sins and embraced a monastic life. Bede touchingly describes the poet's simple death: "Death had no terrors for him; till the last he was making jokes with those around him in the



infirmity. As his last hour approached he asked for Holy Communion, and, before receiving it, he turned to his brethren and asked them whether they had anything against him, and as they answered 'No,' he told them that he died at peace with all men. He received his Lord, laid his head on the pillow, and, gently falling asleep, he thus in silence finished his life."

We now come to the famous Parliament of Whitby, which caused so much feeling between those who followed Celtic traditions and those who desired union with Rome on every point. The subject of discussion was the observance of Easter, which the Celtic monks, according to their tradition, kept on the fourteenth day of the moon, when that day happened to fall on a Sunday, instead of celebrating it on the Sunday after the fourteenth day. The Romans, on the other hand, had adopted the reformed calendar, carefully drawn up by the Alexandrians, which confined the celebration of Easter between March 23rd and April 25th. It thus happened in the Northumbrian court that King Oswy was sometimes celebrating the glorious feast of Easter, while his wife and her chaplains, who followed the Roman usage, were keeping Palm Sunday in purple and mourning. Wilfrid had but now returned from his pilgrimage to Rome, and was full of youthful eagerness and fervour for the universal adoption of the Roman usage. He therefore urged the king to call a Parliament to settle the matter once for all. St. Hilda was then fifty years of age, and an ardent advocate of the tradition received from her beloved spiritual father, St. Aidan. The Parliament was very largely attended by all classes, and the wishes and desires of his subjects seem to have been consulted by the king, who, in the vast assembly, appealed not only to the ecclesiastics and laymen who formed his Parliament, but to all the yeomen standing round, listening to the debate. The king opened the proceedings by saying that, as they all served one God and hoped to go to the same heaven, it was fitting that they should all have the same observance with regard to

the worship of God and the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries. It now rested, therefore, with those present to hear both sides, and determine which party held the true tradition. Bishop Colman, Aidan's successor, first spoke, and was answered by Wilfrid, who ended by saying that however great a saint Columba may have been, Christ had not entrusted to him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Then the king arose, and clenched the whole argument by asking Bishop Colman whether our Lord had given to St. Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and, receiving an affirmative answer, he questioned him further whether Christ had made a similar promise to St. Columba. Here the good bishop could make no answer; whereupon the king aptly remarked that since all were agreed that the keys of heaven were held by St. Peter, he had no mind to quarrel with the porter of heaven, but was determined in all to obey his ordinances, "lest," he concluded, "when I come to heaven's gate he who keeps the keys be displeased with me, and there be none to open and let me in."

The king's speech was much applauded by all who were unbiassed, and from that time forward the Roman observance of Easter was adopted in the kingdom. Unfortunately the Celtic monks, with their Bishop Colman, and St. Hilda and her community, still clung tenaciously to the old traditions, and conceived a great dislike for the young monk, Wilfrid, who had forced the controversy on them. Their opposition is not difficult to understand under the circumstances, and even Venerable Bede, who is an enthusiastic admirer of St. Wilfrid and all that was Roman, allows that though the Celtic monks had doubtless immoderate esteem for their forefathers, which caused them to prefer their own traditions to the practice of the rest of the Church, yet he asserts that such was their virtue in other respects, that this, their one fault, disappears in the light of their patience, chastity, temperance, and untiring efforts after the heights of Christian perfection.

However, if in this matter Hilda had shown herself somewhat too tenacious, God now laid His hand upon her, and by long and sharp suffering the over-eagerness of her

ardent nature was finally subdued and purified. For six years she was subject to a painful and wearying sickness, yet throughout she never ceased to praise God for thus purging her from all defects and exercising her in patience. Nor did she consider herself exempted, on account of her infirmities, from the duties of her exalted position. From her sick bed she continued to regulate the affairs of her community and to instruct her daughters, inciting them to fervour in praising God, as well in adversity as in prosperity. Thus, great in death as she had ever been in life, she joyfully gave up her soul to God on December 15, 680.

God vouchsafed to reveal her death to St. Bees, who was then staying at Hackness, a priory thirteen miles from Whitby. One night Bees was awakened by the sound of the great Abbey bell tolling in the distance. She got up, and, looking out into the darkness, she saw the heavens all aglow with a wondrous light, and angels carrying St. Hilda's pure soul to Paradise. She felt so convinced that this vision was a reality that she went at once to tell the superior what had occurred. The next morning Bees' vision was confirmed by the arrival of messengers from Whitby, who announced the happy departure of their Abbess at the very hour St. Bees had seen her; and not only was she privileged to witness this sight, but it was likewise beheld by the Mistress of Novices, who presided over the house which was set apart for probationers and those newly converted to a more perfect life.

Hilda, the great Abbess, was laid to rest in the church at Whitby, where she remained in peace until the monastery was destroyed by the Danes; her relics were, however, rescued and transferred to Glastonbury.

In the reign of the Conqueror the ancient Abbey was restored by William Percy, an ancestor of the Earls of Northumberland, and continued a most flourishing monastery of Benedictine monks until the Reformation.

“Who shall find a valiant woman? far and from the uttermost coasts is the price of her. She hath put out her hand to strong things. She hath opened her hand to the

needy. She hath given her mouth to wisdom, and the law of clemency is on her tongue. She hath looked well to the paths of her house, and hath not eaten her bread idle. Her children rose up and called her blessed; many daughters have gathered together riches, thou hast surpassed them all. Favour is deceitful, beauty is vain: the woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised" (Proverbs xxxi.)

# ST. MILDRED AND HER KINSFOLK

(660-725)

AMONG the many virgin saints once so popular in this country, none rivalled the great St. Mildred, Abbess of Minster in Thanet. Historians tell us that for many centuries after her death her fame surpassed that of England's great Apostle, St. Augustine. This is all the more wonderful, considering how very little is known of her life. But if the incidents of her earthly pilgrimage were not striking enough to be handed down to us, we have a very long catalogue of miracles, graces, and extraordinary occurrences connected with her after death, and we ask ourselves, Who is this whom God so honours? what are the virtues which have so great power in heaven? The answer seems to be that God, in thus honouring one of His hidden saints, would prove to the world how precious in His sight are those who have kept their hearts wholly for Him, and whose purity has never been tarnished by the foul breath of sin, or scorched by the glare of the world.

The world and society may have changed, and customs and manners have doubtless altered since

the days of St. Mildred, but God is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever; that which attracted Him then attracts Him no less now, and He continues to look for pure souls in which He can delight to dwell; for souls who are willing to remain with Him and to listen to what He has to say; for souls who have time to mourn over His sorrows; for souls who desire only His love and approval; for souls, in short, who, like St. Mildred, are content to lead their lives here unknown and unapplauded, realizing that in another and a better world they have begotten a spiritual progeny who will owe salvation and eternal happiness to their prayerful, hidden lives, and that having sown here in much patience and still greater faith, their harvest will be reaped in heaven.

When, in the year 616, the excellent King Ethelbert, converted to Christianity by St. Augustine, died, his son Eadbald succeeded to his kingdom, but not, alas! to his virtues. He was a sensual, passionate man, who found the Christian religion extremely inconvenient, and determined to have nothing to do with it. He even went so far as to invite his subjects to return to their idolatry and former impious manner of life. A reaction set in, and the newly-converted Saxons, encouraged by the example of their king, were nothing loath to give themselves a loose rein, at least for a time. St. Laurence, who succeeded St. Augustine as Archbishop of Canterbury, did all he could to stem the tide; but his exhortations, whether to king or people, seemed as so many words thrown away. At length he gave way to discouragement at the sight of evil which he could not remedy, and of efforts always renewed yet always fruitless; and he resolved to return to Italy, where he might serve God

freely, and, as he thought, with far more profit to himself and others.

The night before his intended departure he felt too anxious to go to bed, and went instead to the church, where he threw himself upon his knees before the tomb of St. Augustine, and there prayed with tears for the flock which he was about to leave. As he prayed he was overcome by a deep sleep, and while he slept St. Peter appeared to him. In his hand he held a scourge with which he scourged the Archbishop till his back was scarred with wounds. At the same time he asked him how he dared to desert the flock entrusted to him, and to whom he had confided his sheep, while he was flying like a hireling from the wolves. "Are you," continued St. Peter, "so unmindful of my example, I, who, for the sake of those committed to my care by Christ, endured stripes, imprisonment and death?" The next morning the Archbishop, braced by the Apostle's reproof and the chastisement he had received, went to the king, and throwing back his tunic showed him his wounds. The king was very indignant at the sight, for in spite of his evil life he could not help reverencing the saint. However, when he heard what had happened he was speechless with amazement, and being doubtless in great fear lest he should be treated by the Apostle in the same sort, he determined to forestall the punishment and to turn over a new leaf. He renounced idolatry, and put away his unlawful wife, and embracing the faith of Christ did all he could to propagate it.

By his wife, good Queen Emma, he had two sons, the elder of whom died prematurely, leaving a daughter and two sons, both infants. These were brought up by their uncle Ercombent, who became king in 640,

his nephews being too young to reign. The daughter was the Lady Domneva, mother to St. Mildred. The sons were educated by their uncle as became their rank, "yet," says their biographer, "they were even more enriched by divine grace than by secular ornaments, for after their baptism they remained in their innocence and voluntary neglect of worldly advantages, fortifying their other virtues by the safeguard of humility." King Ercombert was a man of solid piety, who, at his accession, overthrew all the idols and temples in his kingdom, leaving not so much as a trace of the former superstition. "Moreover," writes Venerable Bede, "he by royal authority commanded the fast of the forty days of Lent to be strictly observed, and ordained condign punishment against all transgressors, thus teaching those of his nation too much addicted to gluttony to accustom themselves to sobriety and temperance."

When the Lady Domneva, who seems to have been much older than her brothers, had reached a marriageable age, she was wedded to Merwald, a prince of Mercia, youngest son of the old pagan tyrant Penda. Merwald had been converted while a mere youth, and, unlike his father, was of a gentle disposition, much addicted to piety. The union of this holy couple was blessed with a still more holy offspring: three daughters who were named Mildburga, Mildred, and Mildgytha, and a son named Meresin; the latter a child of eminent sanctity, "being made perfect in a short space fulfilled a long time, and God hastened to bring him out of the midst of iniquity lest concupiscence should overturn his innocent mind." Merwald evidently looked upon gentleness as the most beautiful adornment of a woman, since he prefixed



the word "mild" to each of his daughters' names. Mild they were, imitating in this their God, who had deigned to say "Learn of Me, for I am meek." The three sisters have been aptly likened to the three theological virtues; Mildburga to faith, Mildgytha to hope, and Mildred to charity, because she surpassed the others in the fame of her sanctity and the devotion which she evoked. All three were destined to be of the number of those whom Holy Church describes as souls of a nobler stamp: those, namely, who abstain from the espousals of earth and aspire with all the love of their hearts to that divine union of which earthly marriage is but a symbol. They each, therefore, refused to accept any spouse but Jesus: yet this sublime dignity was not to be attained, at least by the two elder, without much suffering and a determination on their part to obtain their end notwithstanding all opposition.

Mildburga was sought in marriage by a neighbouring prince, who was completely captivated by her beauty. When he learnt her resolution to remain a virgin he was equally resolved to have her for his wife, even at the cost of violence. Mildburga, having probably had proof of his passionate nature, determined to escape an outburst by flight. The young man, baulked of his prey, followed in hot pursuit, and being well mounted steadily gained on her. Then, when all escape seemed impossible, God interposed His Almighty power in favour of His chosen spouse. The river which she had just crossed in her flight suddenly became so swollen that it was impossible for her pursuer to ford it, and he was obliged to desist from his iniquitous design. Mildburga's father built a monastery for her at Wenlock in Shropshire, where

many pious virgins gathered round her, and where eventually she was consecrated first abess by Archbishop Theodore. Of her Harpsfield writes: "That though of royal descent and the eldest of her family, she generously despised those privileges which the world admires, aspiring only after God and celestial things. She fixed all her thoughts and desires on this one design, *i.e.*, how she might remove all such impediments as hindered her from consecrating her whole life to heavenly contemplation. For the effecting of this she made a joyful exchange of splendid palaces for a monastery, of royal purple for sackcloth, of a princely diadem for a religious veil, and of all pretensions to the highest earthly espousals for Christ her heavenly Bridegroom. She therefore founded a monastery of religious virgins at Wenlock in Shropshire, which was endowed with ample possessions by her father and her uncle Wulfhere, King of Mercia, and adorned with great privileges and many precious relics of saints. So that the said place represented a new paradise, considering the heavenly society living there, of virgins wholly employed in divine things, especially St. Mildburga, a worthy mother of so holy an offspring; among whom there was a devout emulation and contention in promoting the zealous care of humility, chastity, and all other offices of piety."

Mildburga's younger sister Mildred had been sent for her education to the Benedictine Abbey of Chelles, near Paris. This house had been founded by St. Batilde some years previously, and was the favourite resort of Saxon ladies before convents became so numerous in our own land.

When Mildred arrived at Chelles St. Batilde was

living in humility as a simple nun, but her former position in the world and her romantic history made her by far the most striking and interesting personality in the monastery. By birth a Saxon princess, she had been kidnapped by some Frankish pirates and exposed for sale in the slave market. Though little more than a child, a French nobleman (Lord Chamberlain to Clovis II.) was so struck by her beauty and refinement that he bought her and made her one of his household. Batilde was a Christian, and her faith in God's providence, together with the remembrance of the sufferings of Christ, enabled her to bear patiently, if not gladly, a captivity which would otherwise have been unendurable to one of her birth. Not that her master was unkind to her. On the contrary, he treated her from the outset with a consideration which her position as a slave could scarcely lead her to expect. He saw that she was utterly unfit for menial work, and entrusted her with the lighter duty of waiting on him at table. As she grew in beauty and grace, he even offered to make her his wife, but she refused his suit. Her fellow-slaves, far from envying the confidence placed in her by their master, loved and respected her. They loved her for her sweet manner, modest bearing, and gentle condescension towards them, while they could not fail to respect her for her superior talents and education, and to feel that she was of a very different standing from themselves.

The young King Clovis, who was but seventeen years old, had often been struck by the fair slave who waited upon him when he dined with his chamberlain, and at last he became so enamoured of her that he made her a proposal of marriage. "Sir," she quietly answered, "I am your slave, and whether or no I am bound to submit." "No," exclaimed Clovis, "a slave can never be Queen

of France. I not only free you henceforth from slavery, but I give you full liberty either to reject or to accept my offer." "I thank you," she answered, "for the great favour you show me and for the freedom you have given me, but though no longer your slave, I am still under the guardianship of my father, and cannot accept your offer without leave from my king." Clovis respected the wishes of St. Batilde, and sent ambassadors to England to arrange matters for him. The outraged parents seem to have looked upon the indignity offered to their daughter as a *felix culpa*, since it was to be the means of placing her on the throne of France, and the marriage was duly solemnized to the satisfaction of all parties in 650.

Her life, however, was destined to be anything but a happy one, on account of the troublous times in which she lived, the continual wars between father and son, brother and brother, the murder of several of those nearest and dearest to her, and the calumnies to which she was often a victim. Yet with the brave heart and dauntless spirit which characterized Saxon women she set herself to fill her difficult position, retaining upon the throne that same humble sweetness, charity, and piety which she had shown as a slave. She spent many hours every day in prayer; her almsgiving was boundless, and she built many churches, sanctuaries, and monasteries—as the old chronicle says, she "covered her kingdom with them."

After six years of married life her husband died, and Batilde was appointed regent, an office which she filled for ten years with consummate tact and prudence. At the end of that time she handed over the reins of government to her eldest son, and determined to carry out her long cherished wish of devoting her widowhood to prayer

and retirement. She commissioned a trusty servant to seek out a secluded spot near Paris where she might find a monastery in which to end her days. "Go," she said, "and find me a place where I can contemplate the heavens undisturbed." A royal manor named Chelles, four leagues from Paris, was selected, and a monastery soon erected on a site where a foundation had formerly been made by St. Clotilde.

At Batilde's request a nun was sent from the Abbey of Jouarre to train herself and her companions in monastic life; this was Bertille, who, though still young, had already earned for herself a great reputation for sanctity, and was the loadstone which soon attracted a large and flourishing community to Chelles. Alban Butler tells us that "in this numerous family of holy queens, princesses, and virgins no contests arose but those of humility and charity; no strife but as to who should first submit and humble herself lowest, and who should outdo the rest in meekness, devotion, penance, and in all the exercises of monastic discipline. The holy Abbess Bertille, who daily saw two great queens at her feet, seemed the most humble and the most fervent among her sisters, and showed by her conduct that no one commands well or with safety who has not first learned and is not always ready to obey well." The second queen here mentioned was St. Hereswith, sister to St. Hilda, and Queen of the East Angles, who, emulating the example of St. Batilde, came to Chelles to consecrate her widowhood to God. These two sainted queens could never bear their former position to be alluded to; they considered themselves privileged to be the last among the novices, and were never so happy as when they were ignored or treated as menials. Once when Batilde was asked how she could relish her

humble state of servitude after having enjoyed such widespread influence, she answered, "When I think of my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and the Lord of the Universe, who came not to be waited upon but to serve, and when I see Him washing the feet even of a traitor, I know not where to place myself, and it seems to me that the greatest happiness imaginable would be to be trodden under foot by all."

With so many and so great examples of virtue continually before her, Mildred soon became versed in the science of the saints, and made such rapid strides in the way of perfection that her biographer tells us that she excelled her companions in humility and virtue. The Abbess Bertille, seeing how the child was endowed with uncommon gifts both of nature and of grace, singled her out for more special attention, fostering and developing her talents, and seeking to satisfy her eager desire for a more profound knowledge of God and holy things. She seems to have been diligent with her pen, for during her sojourn at Chelles she transcribed the Psalter, probably in the much ornamented style of the day. Yet she had not been sent to Chelles with a view to being trained to monastic life, but merely to be suitably educated before taking the high place in society which would naturally fall to her. When, then, she was asked in marriage by a very rich and powerful French nobleman of the neighbourhood, the Abbess thought the match a very suitable one for her and pressed her to accept the offer, in spite of Mildred's assurance that she wished to be a nun. The Abbess possibly thought it prudent to put her vocation to a thorough test, and not to throw away so advantageous an offer for a mere sentiment of piety. At any rate, Mildred was proof against all persuasion, and constantly and courageously

resisted all arguments, passing unscathed through this fiery ordeal. Soon after a letter arrived from England, inviting her to rejoin her mother at the Abbey of Minster in Thanet, and the Abbess gladly availed herself of this opportunity to send her charge out of harm's way, for she feared that Chelles would be no longer a safe refuge for her, in such close proximity to the baffled suitor.

Before accompanying Mildred to her future home, let us look back and see how it was that the Abbey of Minster was so closely associated with her family, and why her mother was then living there. Ercombert, King of Kent, died in 664, and though his nephews Ethelred and Ethelbert (Mildred's uncles) had prior right to the kingdom, his son Egbert succeeded him. Ethelred and Ethelbert seem to have been devoid of any desire to hold the reins of government, and were quite content to see their cousin on the throne; while he, being of a kindly disposition, was very glad that the two brothers should continue to make their home with him. For a time all went on well, and no thought of jealousy or rivalry arose to mar their peace. But the king had a prime minister named Thunder, who, as his name well describes, was destined to disturb those who would have lived quietly together. He conceived a violent hatred for the two brothers, whose blameless lives were a continual reproach to him, seeing that he was the embodiment of all wickedness. Satan, who reigned supreme in the heart of this monster, suggested to him the diabolical plan of sowing the seeds of envy and suspicion in the king's mind. The crafty minister began hinting to his master that he was in a very dangerous position with two claimants to his throne so near his person: all the more so as they were growing in popularity to his own prejudice. After many

insinuations of a like nature he at length proposed that they should be secretly removed. At first Egbert would not listen to such an idea ; but after Thunder had worked upon him for some time he grew silent—a silence which his minister feigned to take for consent, though the king was not at all prepared for what was to follow.

Thunder had no difficulty in carrying out his evil design. He was a consummate hypocrite, and had treated the objects of his dislike with so good a show of respect and affection that the guileless young men had admitted him to their intimacy. He asked them one evening to take a stroll with him, and as they were talking he suddenly turned on them and despatched them both with his sword. The unexpectedness of the attack prevented them from escape or defence, for they were unarmed. The crime was no sooner perpetrated than Thunder began to fear the consequences. He knew not where to hide the bodies, knowing that search would surely be made for the missing princes, and that freshly-dug earth would excite suspicion. He then conceived the extraordinary plan of burying them under the seat upon which the king was wont to hold audience in the open air, persuading himself that would be the last place likely to be searched. But God, to whom all secrets lie revealed, desired to show forth the innocence of those whose lives had been so ruthlessly stricken down, and He caused a wondrous light to shine round the throne, which led to the discovery of the murder. The king immediately sent for Thunder, and asked him whether he knew anything of the crime ; upon which he at once threw all the odium upon his master, saying that he had only acted in the king's interest and, as he thought, with his consent. At this confession the king was overwhelmed with remorse and true sorrow



for what had occurred. The sequel is related as follows by Matthew of Westminster: "Inwardly considering what had passed, the king imputed the whole crime to himself alone, and being wonderfully confounded in mind, spent the whole night following in tears. As soon as the morning light appeared he commanded an assembly to be convoked of his nobles and the newly-arrived Archbishop Theodore, and to them he freely related all former passages touching the business, and likewise how the night before a pillar of fire had descended from heaven on the bodies of those holy princes. The Archbishop thereupon gave his advice that the bodies should be carried to the metropolitan church and there buried after a royal manner. Thence proceeding, therefore, to the place, they found the relics indecently laid under the king's chair. These things befell in a village belonging to the king called Estrey, near Sandwich. Wherefore taking up the bodies and honourably placing them in coffins, the Archbishop commanded them to be carried to Christchurch in Canterbury. But in vain was this attempted, for with all the force they could use they could not remove them from the place. Whereupon, changing his purpose, he advised that they should be taken to the Church of St. Augustine, but with as little success as before. At last it was agreed that they should be carried to the monastery of Wakering, of great renown in those days. Which being resolved upon, the sacred bodies were as easily removed as if they had no weight at all. Being arrived therefore at that place, the exequies were solemnly performed by the Archbishop, who buried the bodies near to the great altar."

After the funeral the king, desirous to make atonement as far as might be for the crime, asked the Archbishop to appoint some suitable monument of expiation,

Archbishop Theodore first reproved the king very sharply for his indirect share in the murder of his cousins, and then advised him to make a grant to the Lady Domneva, sister to the victims, of some land, upon which she might found a monastery, where the praises of God should never cease, and where the holy lives of the nuns should rise daily before the throne of God as an odour of sweet incense, causing the Divine vengeance to be turned away from the founder. To this proposal Egbert readily agreed, and sent for his cousin the Lady Domneva (Mildred's mother), who was now a widow, and had consecrated her mourning to God by a vow of perpetual chastity. When she arrived the king met her with downcast face, and begging her forgiveness, asked her to name the place and the extent of land in his dominions suitable for this holy purpose. She selected the Isle of Thanet, off Kent, a very beautiful and fertile spot, and asked that the limits of the donation should be fixed by the distance that her pet hind could run in one course. The whole party thereupon set out for Thanet, and the animal was started, while the king looked on, his face brightening as he watched the course, following on horseback. The more the animal encompassed the more pleased he was, for his heart was generous and his repentance true. Not so the real murderer, Thunder, who had accompanied the expedition. Mad with rage, he could not at length contain his passion, and declaring the hind bewitched, he set spurs to his horse to overtake and kill it. But his hour of reckoning had come; in jumping over a well his horse slipped and horse and rider fell in and were drowned, and as William of Malmesbury adds, "descended quick into hell." The scene of the accident has ever since borne the name of "Thunder's Leap."

There are accounts still extant of this curious grant of land. For instance, in a chart granted by Edward the Confessor to the Abbey, henceforth known as "the Minster," we find the following passage: "I who am descended from the stock of King Edelbert and, by the divine grace, do enjoy his kingdom, do in like manner grant the Isle of Thanet, which King Egbert gave for an hereditary possession to the venerable Queen Domneva, the mother of St. Mildred, as much thereof as a hind in her course encompassed, in satisfaction for the murder of her two brethren, Ethelred and Ethelbert, who by command of the said king were unjustly slain by the accursed Thunder, whom presently after the divine vengeance pursued in a terrible manner by a sudden death."

The gift included some ten thousand acres. The building of the Abbey was promptly set in hand, and in a short time a stately pile arose and a flourishing community soon peopled its walls. The first Abbess was named Sabba; she had probably grown old under the yoke of religious discipline in another monastery, which had rendered her capable of training up her young flock. To her the Lady Domneva readily submitted herself, and when the church was completed Archbishop Theodore came in person with much pomp to consecrate it.

St. Mildred was then about fifteen years of age, and not long after her mother recalled her to England, a summons she was all the more willing to obey seeing the danger which threatened her in France. Arrived at Minster, she was soon admitted to make her religious profession according to the Rule of St. Benedict by the vows of Obedience, of Stability, and Conversion of Manners. Here she exercised herself especially in the

three virtues laid down by St. Benedict as essential to the monastic state, silence, obedience without delay, and humility which leads to that love of God which is perfect and casteth out fear, while her charity towards her sisters caused her to bear patiently with their weakness and ever to consider their will and pleasure rather than her own. Her virtuous life, learning, and wisdom induced the nuns to choose Mildred as their Superior on the death of their Abbess Sabba, which happened soon after Mildred's profession. Her youth was compensated for by the great prudence of her character. The Minster community numbered then some seventy members, and these Mildred instructed more by deeds than by words, making the wisdom of her precepts manifest by her actions. She loved all her spiritual children with the tenderness which characterized her, and ever exhorted them to live up to their high calling and to go forward in virtue. She knew how to adapt herself to the intelligence and temperament of each, mingling sweetness with necessary severity. The peace which is stamped upon the monastic state as its leading feature had so taken possession of Mildred's heart that it overflowed upon those with whom she came in contact, making her beloved of God and man. In short, her biographer sums up her virtues as follows: "Archbishop St. Theodore consecrated St. Mildred Abbess over seventy religious virgins, among whom she behaved herself rather as a servant than as a mistress, desiring more to be loved than to be feared by them; and by continual watching, fasting, and praying spent her life in the service of God."

We have only two incidents of Mildred's life at Minster, both of which serve to prove the innocence of her heart and her close union with God. We are told

that she had a special devotion to her angel guardian, who often favoured her with his visible presence, and who, on more than one occasion, showed how truly God had given His angels charge of her. The devil, as is his wont, was filled with envy at the sight of the peace of soul enjoyed by the Saint, and, if he could not tarnish her purity, determined at least to disturb her peace. One night, as she slept after Matins, she was rudely awakened. With the quick instinct of the saints she realized the nearness of evil, and in fear and apprehension called to her angel to take care of her. The summons was quickly responded to, and she saw her faithful guardian standing before her, resplendent with power and beauty, to preserve her from the wily attacks of her enemy. This vision stayed at her bedside during the remainder of the night. But the devil, though baffled once, was not ashamed to make another attempt, and some time after, when she was keeping vigil in the church, he drew near and in an insulting way put out the light by which she was reading her Psalter, leaving her in the dark. Again she was frightened at the approach of her foe, and cried aloud to her angel; and lo! a heavenly light filled the church—a light which the son of darkness could not brook; nor do we again hear of him tormenting the Saint.

At Folkestone, not very far from Minster, dwelt St. Eanswitha, Mildred's great aunt, a most holy Abbess who, while she lived, must have been a most powerful help to Mildred in her youth and inexperience. Eanswitha's father had wished her to marry a prince of Northumbria, but she constantly refused; and at length persuaded him to give her an estate where she might build a monastery and consecrate herself to God, together with other virgins who, moved by her example,

had joined themselves to her company. They were clothed in the habit of St. Benedict by the monks who had come from Rome, and as the people of Kent had never seen the like before, they christened them the Black Nuns. We read that the great devotion of these nuns was to return unceasing thanks to God for the inestimable blessing of the Faith conferred upon their country.

There is a story told of St. Eanswitha which Capgrave relates as follows: "These sacred virgins found only one incommodity in this their happy retirement, which was a penury of sweet water. For the monastery being seated on the top of the high rocks, the water necessary for their daily use was, with great labour, to be brought from a spring a good way distant. The holy virgin Eanswitha was sensible of this inconvenience, and, after she had by prayer solicited our Lord, she went to the fountain, more than a mile remote from the monastery, and striking the water with a staff commanded it to follow her. The deaf element heard and obeyed the sacred virgin's voice and, against the inclination of nature, followed her steps, till overcoming all the difficulties of the passage, it mounted up to the monastery, where it abundantly served all their uses. One particular more increased the admiration of this event; for this little rivulet in the way being to pass through a pool, flowed notwithstanding pure and free from all mixture. After several years innocently and chastely spent in the office of Abbess she was at last seized with a languishing infirmity, during which the fame of her love to her eternal Spouse increased, and at last she was called to His embrace. Her body was deposed in the same monastery, where it was held in great veneration, till the sea, breaking in, forced them to remove it to the church in the adjoining town of Folkestone."

Meanwhile Mildred's elder sister Mildburga was advancing daily in God's holy love, and rivalling St. Mildred in the practice of virtue. She was much given to prayer and contemplation, and the country people, honouring the power of her prayer with God, would often come to her in their troubles to make her their intercessor. As a rule she was only too willing to be their mediatrix ; but on one occasion the demand was too extraordinary for her to accede to it without much persuasion. While she was praying in a little oratory in the garden a poor widow came to her and placed her dead child at the Saint's feet. Then with tears and entreaties she implored Mildburga to restore it to life. The Saint was filled with compassion for the grief of the afflicted mother, yet she told her it was madness to ask her for such a thing, since God alone could restore life. "Go rather," she continued, "and bury your child, remembering that you yourself will shortly follow him, for all mankind must die." The mother, however, was not to be put off ; and she only protested the more that she knew God would restore life to her child if only Mildburga would ask it of Him, since He had never refused her anything. Moreover, she added that nothing would induce her to move from the spot until her request was granted. Poor Mildburga was torn with conflicting emotions of humility and compassion. At length, like St Benedict, in a similar predicament, she prayed : "O God, look not upon my sin, but on the faith of this woman who asks for the life of her child, and restore to life the body which Thou hast created." As she prayed the widow saw a bright light encircling her, as though the fervour of her prayer could not be contained within her heart, and at the same moment the little lifeless corpse was restored to its former health and strength and returned to the enraptured mother.

The account of her death is given by Harpsfield as follows: "Mildburga, having thus made a wonderful progress in all kinds of virtue, and desiring nothing but her heavenly Spouse and His divine presence, when her age and strength began to decline, her beloved Saviour called her to Himself, after she had been purified with daily fevers. In her last sickness, therefore, she called together her whole community, which she commended in her prayers to God and desired them after her death to make choice of a pious and fitting superior. She exhorted them likewise to unity and purity of heart, often repeating: 'Blessed are the peaceable, for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.' Having added other like admonitions, and religiously armed herself against death by the Holy Sacraments of the Church, she departed happily on February 20, 722, to her eternal Bridegroom, to reign with Him for ever for whose love she had despised all things of earth. And for a testimony of her present happiness, God was pleased after many ages to discover her sacred body to the knowledge and veneration of pious Christians in the year 1101, during the reign of Henry I."

Regarding the finding of her relics William of Malmsbury writes: "St Mildburga rests at Wenlock. In ancient times her memory was celebrated by the inhabitants, but after the coming in of the Normans, by reason that the place of her sepulchre was unknown, she became forgotten. But of late a convent of Cluny monks having been established there, whilst they were busy in erecting the fabric of a new church, a certain child running earnestly over the pavement, the vault of her sepulchre broke under him, by which means the body of the holy virgin was discovered. Which being



taken up, a most odoriferous vapour, as of a most precious balm, perfumed the whole church. And such a world of miracles was wrought by her intercession that wonderful multitudes flocked thither, both rich and poor, insomuch that there was scarce room in the open fields to receive them, so strong a faith they had to find remedy there for their maladies. Neither did they fail of their expectation, for none departed away without a cure, or, at least, a mitigation of their disease. And particularly the king's evil, incurable by physicians, was through the merits of this holy virgin healed perfectly in certain persons."

Three years later St. Mildred followed Mildburga to the grave. Of the third sister, Mildgytha, all that we know is that she entered the monastery of Estrey in Kent, built by the penitent King Egbert, where she lived in all purity, and died the death of the saints on February 26th, on which day we find her name in the martyrology. She seems to have died long before her sisters, while still quite young, which accounts for so little mention being made of her.

After long years spent in that daily fidelity which earns the crown of life, Mildred's earthly pilgrimage drew to a close. Like other chosen souls, God did not fail to purify her with suffering, sickness, and pain; yet in suffering she grew not weary, but like a faithful servant she showed herself willing, nay glad, to bear all things for her crucified Lord; and resting in the hopes of the reward she would receive from His hands, she continued to rejoice amid her protracted pains. She was sixty-five years old when she died. We have no record left by the historians of the exact manner of her happy departure, but of her posthumous

fame Montalembert writes that "it would require many pages to narrate the violent struggles, the visions and other incidents connected with the history of her relics; and that though her name has once more become fashionable in our days, it recalls to our ungrateful contemporaries nothing but the vague poetry of the past, whereas it was mixed up with the real history of the Danes and Normans, of Canute the Great, of Edward the Confessor, of Lanfranc and of Edward I., the terrible conqueror of the Scots and Welsh."

For many years Mildred's body rested in peace among her sisters at Minster. But the island was devastated by the Danes, and the monastery burnt to the ground, the Abbess and nuns preferring to perish in the flames which destroyed their home than to risk the outrages of the pirates. Amid the general destruction St. Mildred's body lay unharmed, and her tomb was still held in great veneration by the surviving inhabitants of Thanet. The island was eventually given by King Canute to the monks of St. Augustine's, Canterbury. The monks were very anxious to have the relics of St. Mildred in this their own abbey church, but it was long before they could obtain the king's permission to translate them there, for he justly feared the indignation of the people of Thanet if robbed of their treasure. However, after he had been saved from shipwreck through the intercession of St. Augustine, he was disposed to allow the monks whatever they might ask, and consented to the removal of the relics, provided the utmost secrecy was preserved regarding the pious theft. Thereupon the cunning Abbot ordered a great banquet to be prepared, to which he invited the

leading people of Thanet; and while they were all feasting and making merry the monks stole away, and having dug up the relics, placed them on a boat waiting in readiness. But the removal was not effected without great difficulty, as the stone coffin was hard to break into, and the heavy lid could not be lifted without much pains. The result was that the merry-makers got wind of the affair, and before the monks with their precious burden had rowed far down the river they found themselves hotly pursued. They had, nevertheless, the advantage of a good start, and succeeded in getting safely away. When the news of their arrival at St. Augustine's got spread abroad the people came in crowds to welcome and to do honour to the Virgin Saint. She was laid in a suitable shrine near the high altar of St. Peter, and there, according to a vow made by the Abbot in the event of becoming possessed of her relics, a Mass was daily said in her honour.

William of Malmesbury quaintly remarks that "the sacred body of Mildred was translated to the monastery of St. Augustine in Canterbury, where it is with great devotion venerated by the monks, and for the fame of her piety and sweetness, answerable to her name, honoured by all. And although all the corners of the said monastery are full of saints' bodies, eminent for their sanctity and merits, inasmuch as any one of them might suffice to give lustre to the whole kingdom, yet the relics of none are with more affectionate honour venerated, than hers. She is present to all who love her, and ready to fulfil the requests of every one."

The truth of this latter statement was experienced by the wife of St. Edward the Confessor, Queen

Editha, who, at a time when troubles and persecutions rained thickly upon her, had recourse to St. Mildred. As she prayed she was favoured with a vision of the Saint, who sweetly consoled her, and promised her that her grievances should be redressed, and that she should end her days happily. This is only one of many instances of Mildred's intervention on behalf of the afflicted, whether in mind or body. William the Conqueror, at his accession, was deeply impressed by the veneration paid to the Saint, nor would he venture to violate the right of sanctuary claimed at her tomb.

In later years some of her relics were translated to Daventry in Holland, and preserved in the church of SS. Lebuin and Marcellinus, two English missionaries and the first apostles of the Low Countries. These relics were restored to her native land by the Archbishop of Utrecht in 1882, in answer to the petition of the Benedictine nuns who had founded a monastery in her honour at Minster in Thanet. The holy relics were received with great rejoicing and solemn procession and ceremony by her countrymen, and her cultus, which had never ceased in Holland and Belgium, was once more revived in her own land.

Her Feast is celebrated on July 13th in more than one monastery; and those who wear her habit and strive to walk in her footsteps pray that she may continue to show herself the powerful intercessor and advocate of the England she loved so well, taking her share in the "second spring" which we so gladly and confidently see budding forth in our land.

## SAINT WERBURGH

(D. 699)

ABOUT the beginning of the seventh century, when England was earning for herself the most glorious of her titles, that of "Island of the Saints," a little girl was born in Staffordshire who was to be the object of the love and devotion of her countrymen, until the chill blast of heresy and unbelief swept away nearly all that was best and holiest from the land. Yet even the Reformation was not able entirely to extinguish the fame of St. Werburgh: her name is still familiar in some parts, and Chester Cathedral is dedicated to her.

She united in her veins the blood of two widely different races: one the very essence of all that was pagan, fierce and cruel; the other the perfection of all that was Christian, holy, and gentle. Her father, Wulfhere, was the son of the famous—or shall we not rather say infamous?—Penda, King of the Mercians, who, by the countless victims of his unholy wars, swelled the white-robed army of martyrs, foremost amongst whom were the five kings, St. Oswald, Egric, Annas, Sigebert, and Edwin. He is described by the chronicler as a man who breathed nothing but fury and war, and loved to tread in ways stained with blood. At length, in 655, he was slain in battle by King Oswin, the brother of St. Oswald, who had promised that if he got the victory he

would consecrate his daughter to serve God in perpetual virginity. Though the pagan army was thirty times as large as the Christian, yet the pagans were cut to pieces and their leaders and generals slain. King Oswin, mindful of his vow, offered his daughter to God in holy religion ; “and having spent three score years in our Lord’s service, the happy virgin hastened to the embraces of the heavenly Bridegroom.” Penda was succeeded by his son Peda, who became a Christian, but was assassinated three years later ; and Wulfhere then became the rightful heir to the largest kingdom of the Heptarchy.

St. Werburgh’s birth happened most probably many years before Wulfhere’s accession, as the course of the narrative will show. Wulfhere was married to the saintly and beautiful Ermenilda, daughter to Erconbert, King of Kent, and of Sexburga his wife. The latter was the daughter of the King Annas, of holy memory, who was slain by Penda. Wulfhere and Ermenilda were strangely matched, for if Wulfhere had inherited his father’s courage and military prowess, he had likewise inherited his violent and cruel temper. We wonder how St. Sexburga could have entrusted her gentle young daughter to a man of such character, and, above all, to a pagan ; yet she may have foreseen that Ermenilda’s influence would at length prevail, and that the leaven of her virtues would gradually impregnate the whole country over which she would one day be queen. Besides, it was not the first time in history that the “leopard was to lie down with the kid, and the wolf with the lamb” (Isaias xi. 6) ; a Patricius and a Monica, a Clovis and a Clotilde come readily to mind.

Wulfhere and Ermenilda had four children. Werburgh was the eldest and the only girl ; the boys were Ulfald, Ruffin, and Kenred : the last seems to have been

much younger than the others. Wulfhere probably did not interfere with the religion of his daughter, since she was baptized and allowed openly to profess her faith. He no doubt thought Christianity good enough for women: but with his sons it was a very different matter. He wished them to be fond of war, to shed blood without scruple, and to shrink from no means so long as they attained their end. Ermenilda was therefore obliged to use her influence with the utmost tact, and to instil Christian principles into them without allowing their father to suspect what she was doing. Fortunately the children all inherited their mother's temperament and virtues; and she did not cease to water and tend with the utmost care the tender plants entrusted to her, endeavouring to enkindle within their hearts the undying flame of charity, and to impress on their minds the imperishable truths which lead to life eternal.

Werburgh must very soon have noticed the contrast between the violent nature of her pagan father and the gentle sweetness of her Christian mother, since we read of her that she had a serious thoughtfulness beyond her years, and took no pleasure in the usual enjoyments of a child. Her chief delight was to sit by her mother's side, to learn from her to love God and His Saints, and to go with her to assist at the celebration of Mass and the Divine Office, during which she would kneel the whole time out of reverence. Divine Providence had constituted Ermenilda the refuge of all in distress and the mother of the poor and needy; and in all her exercises of charity she found a constant companion and a ready assistant in Werburgh.

At that time St. Chad, afterwards Bishop of Lichfield, was living as a hermit in closest union with God in a neighbouring forest. St. Ermenilda desired very much that her sons should have him for their master in the

spiritual life now that they were growing into man's estate ; yet she dreaded her husband's violence if he should come to know of her plan, and endeavoured to carry it out with the greatest secrecy. It was therefore agreed that the two elder boys should go out on pretence of hunting expeditions, and that in the course of the chase they should slip away and seek out the hermit's cell. This happened several times, no one apparently suspecting anything ; and their young hearts being inflamed by St. Chad's instructions, they begged him not to defer their Baptism. At length the Saint acceded to their request, and, pouring upon their heads the regenerating water, washed their souls white in the Blood of the Lamb.

In the meanwhile Werburgh had reached a marriageable age, and on account of her striking beauty and sweet ways, she was eagerly sought after by suitors for her hand. But her chronicler tells us that though her beauty of form made her exceedingly in request, the still greater beauty of her mind caused her to care only for Him who is beautiful above the sons of men ; and that the vehement longing she had to taste of His inestimable sweetness caused her heart to pant after Him as a thirsty stag, heated in the chase, pants for water. She had therefore bound her virginity by vow to Christ, and with angelic purity repulsed all suitors, God Himself dwelling in her as sole Master of all her affections.

Among those who sought her in marriage was a powerful nobleman named Werebode. Wulf here was greatly indebted to this man, and was anxious to keep on good terms with him from motives of policy as well as of gratitude. He therefore readily agreed to give him his daughter, provided she herself would agree to the union. Werebode was a headstrong, haughty man, unaccustomed to be thwarted, and with a very exalted idea of his own



attractions. When, therefore, Werburgh turned a deaf ear to his proposals, he was stung to the quick, and being mad with passion, his love speedily turned into hate. He understood that it was her religion which had raised a barrier between them, and he determined to be revenged both on Werburgh and her faith. He had noticed the mysterious disappearance of the two young princes in the forest, and had secretly watched their interviews with St. Chad. He therefore formed the diabolical plan of compassing their ruin.

He sought out their father and poured out a story full of slander and cunning about the deceit of his sons, telling him how they had deserted the gods of their ancestors, Odin and Thor, and had embraced the religion of the Crucified, and how they were plotting to seize their father's crown and kingdom to make it Christian too. It was easy enough to rouse Wulfhere's passionate nature, and Werebode so worked upon his feelings that he became beside himself with rage. "Come," said Werebode, "and I will give you proof of my story;" and with that the two rode off into the forest. It happened that at the moment they reached the hermit's cell the two boys were kneeling in the rude chapel, having but now received holy Baptism from the hands of St. Chad. Their souls were clad in the white robe of innocence, a look of unearthly peace and joy lighted up their fair faces. The King was exasperated, and, breaking in violently upon them, demanded angrily of them to renounce their superstition and give up their foolery. But no threats could move them, and the father in his fury bade Werebode murder his own sons. Werebode had attained his end, but his triumph was to be shortlived, for soon after he perished miserably.

We may well imagine the grief, not unmingled with joy, of the holy mother at the news of this martyrdom :

grief at the terrible crime committed by her husband, and at the loss of two who were dearer to her than life, yet joy and gratitude for the martyrs' death which had won for her sons an immortal crown. Taking Werburgh with her, Ermenilda set out for the hermitage, and there found St. Chad keeping vigil by the precious relics. Ulfald and Ruffin lay locked in each other's embrace, apparently wrapped in a deep sleep, for no trace remained on their countenances to tell of the violence of their death; rather the smile which lingered there betokened the souls' awakening to gaze for ever on the Master for whom their lives had been sacrificed. Tenderly and reverently St. Chad, assisted by Ermenilda and Werburgh, laid them in their last resting-place, which was soon to become so favourite a place of pilgrimage. Then the mother and daughter retraced their steps homewards with heavy hearts, not knowing what to expect, scarce knowing what to hope for. But the dying prayer of the sons for their father had not been in vain; the blood which they had shed cried for mercy and not for vengeance, and even Wulfhere's hard nature could not withstand the flood of grace which the little martyrs obtained for him. Remorse, keen and deep, had taken possession of him, and he bitterly deplored the fearful result of his passion. Humbled and crushed, he listened the more readily to the words of hope spoken to him by Ermenilda and Werburgh, and consented to go to St. Chad to confess his sin and be instructed by him in the faith for which his sons had died. Finally he embraced Christianity, and with the sacred waters of Baptism expiated his crime. He caused a priory built of stone to be erected on the scene of the martyrdom which has given its name to the place (Stone, Staffordshire); and he undertook to finish and amply endow the monastery of Peterborough, begun by

his brother, as a lasting monument of his sin and repentance.

From henceforth he was a changed man, and when in 658 he was proclaimed King of the Mercians, three years after his brother's death, he utterly rooted out of his kingdom "the pagan worship of devils," commanding the name of Christ to be preached everywhere and many churches to be built. William of Malmesbury says of him "that at his first accession to the throne, to the end that he might not deceive the expectation of his subjects, he spared no diligence, study, or labour to show himself a good prince who sought the profit and happiness of his kingdom. Moreover that by his favour and countenance he earnestly advanced the Christian faith, then gasping for life as being but a little before brought in by his brother." Capgrave, speaking of St. Ermenilda, says that she was so zealous in promoting the Christian faith that by her persuasion, kindness, and holy example, the rude and perverse nation of the Mercians was brought to submit to the sweet yoke of Christ; while her husband Wulfhere, complying with her desires, assisted her in extirpating idolatrous superstition and filling the kingdom with churches and priests.

Meanwhile, however, Werburgh sighed after a higher and better life than that of the Court. Both she and her mother despised riches; the gold, precious stones, and embroidered robes which form the paraphernalia of royalty were far more burdensome than honourable to them, and while at times of regal state they were obliged to submit to be thus bedecked, they grieved to feel that they were still held prisoners by such vanity.

At length Werburgh obtained her father's consent to follow the call which had so long sounded in her heart to give herself unreservedly to God and His service

in a monastery. The fame of the Abbey of Ely in Cambridgeshire, which had been founded by her great-aunt, the beautiful and gifted Etheldreda, or Audry, was already widespread ; but to Werburgh it must have been well known, for besides her aunt, her grandmother had recently taken the veil there. Her grandfather, King Ercombert, died in 664, and Harpsfield tells us how her grandmother, St. Sexburga, "like a bird which had been a long time enclosed in a cage gladly escaped out of it, and divesting herself of all her royal ornaments and marks of royal pomp and pride betook herself first to the Abbey of Sheppey, and later to the society of holy virgins in the city of Ely governed by her sister the most glorious virgin Etheldreda." It was, then, most natural that Ely should have been singled out as the future home of Werburgh, and that Wulfhere and Ermenilda should have chosen to entrust their daughter to those who by every title would love and cherish her.

Wulfhere himself escorted Werburgh to Ely, accompanied by a large suite of noblemen and retainers. Upon their arrival they were met in state at the great door of the Abbey by the Abbess and her nuns, St. Chad, now Bishop of Lichfield, and a number of ecclesiastics. The reception of such a postulant was no small event in the annals of the Monastery, for Wulfhere was the most powerful of all the kings of the Heptarchy, and, besides, there was not one who did not marvel at the generosity of the fierce old Saxon monarch, subdued by penance, and bowed down by the remembrance of a crime forgiven but not forgotten, who thus sacrificed to God his only daughter in all her youth and beauty. Werburgh fell upon her knees before the community, and with great humility asked to be received as a postulant into the Abbey. Her request being granted, she was led in procession into the church. When she

had laid aside her royal robes, St. Chad cut off her hair, and gave her the coarse habit of religion in exchange for her rich garments, and the veil of virginity in place of the royal diadem. The "Te Deum" was then sung, and the humble novice, resigning herself entirely into the hands of her superiors, sought to divest herself interiorly, as well as exteriorly, of all that savoured of the world, and to hasten as a pilgrim to her eternal home. Wulfhere left her with many tears, yet found it in his heart to thank God for choosing his daughter for His bride; and how much he valued the honour thus bestowed was showed when he returned the following year to be present at her Profession. He invited for the occasion the King of Kent, the King of the East Angles, with all the great lords of their kingdoms, and his own three brothers with their retinues. All these he entertained with a magnificence suited to such an occasion as that of the Espousals of the Son of God with his daughter.

Wulfhere did not long survive Werburgh's consecration: he had reigned seventeen years, and by his zeal for the faith in the latter years of his life had rendered himself beloved both to God and man, when in 675 he was transferred, as we may hope, from an earthly to an eternal kingdom. His widow, while she mourned his loss, rejoiced to be able to cut the chain which bound her to the world, and to embrace the religious state after which she had so long sighed: and she subjected herself to the sweet yoke of Christ together with her daughter in the Monastery of Ely. Here she lived unweariedly in all holiness, giving to the nuns an example of every virtue. Mother and daughter vied with one another in humility, each desiring to be subject to the other: the mother, honouring the virginity of her daughter, would have Werburgh be the first, while

Werburgh naturally desired to give place to her mother. The chronicler gives this account of St. Werburgh's life and conduct at this period: "Her only diligence and solicitude was employed in avoiding all things which might displease the eyes of her heavenly Bridegroom, for whose love she despised gold, jewels, rich attire, and all other vanities admired by the world. All her thoughts were busied in this one thing, how she might excel her religious sisters in observing silence, abstinence, watchings, devout reading, and prayers. Which holy design having compassed, insomuch as she was as far exalted above them in these and all other virtues as in the nobleness of her descent, yet she thought so meanly of herself, and was so free from any arrogance or pride, that she showed herself always ready and willing to obey all, and cheerfully undertook the vilest offices, among which a charitable care of the poor and needy, to whom she was a pious and tender mother, took the principal place. In a word, through the whole course of her life her conversation was such as showed that though her body moved on earth yet her mind was always fixed in heaven."

In 679 Werburgh and the nuns of Ely suffered a grievous loss in the death of their Abbess St. Etheldreda, after she had governed the monastery for seven years, and had been to her spiritual children a model of piety and virtue. Venerable Bede relates of her that she rarely eat more than once a day except on great solemnities or when her infirmities forced her to do otherwise; and that from midnight Matins until break of day she would remain in the church absorbed in prayer. He specially mentions her mortification in wearing coarse woollen garments, and in denying herself the luxury of warm baths to which she had been accustomed. She suffered much before her death from a very painful

tumour on her neck ; but she rejoiced in this humiliating infirmity, saying to those who compassionated her, “ I know that I am justly pained in my neck because when I was a young maid I wore about my neck weighty chains of jewels ; therefore God in His mercy has thus punished me, that the fierce heat and redness of the swelling in my neck may satisfy for my former pride and levity.”

St. Werburgh's grandmother Sexburga was unanimously chosen to succeed her sister in the abbatial office. For fifteen years she had lived under religious discipline and had been all the more assiduous in her devotions and rigorous in her mortifications in that she had come so late in life to the school of perfection. But if she had come late to religion it was from no lack of desire on her part, for her biographer tells us that God thought fit to delay the execution of her aspirations that she might, with no less merit and far more labour in her condition as a sovereign, afford examples of virtue to all her subjects. This she had performed in an admirable manner, being, as Capgrave describes her, “ a most revered mother to the great ones and a kind patroness to the poor. The former observed her as a princess, the latter as a mother, those venerated her majesty, these admired her humility. To the nobles she was awful, and to meaner persons seemed equal ; to all she was amiable and to all venerable, rarely seen in throngs but frequent in churches.” After twenty-five years of married life, her husband, King Ercombert, died, and she retired to the Isle of Sheppy in Kent, where she had founded a monastery for nuns known as “ the Minster,” and there received the veil from Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury. As foundress, the reins of government were at once given into her hands, but she longed to live in subjection as a simple

nun ; so no sooner did she hear of the foundation made at Ely by St. Etheldreda, her younger sister, than she determined to go and join her. Therefore assembling the nuns—about eighty in number—she thus addressed them : “ Farewell, my daughters ; I leave you Jesus for your protector, the angels for your companions, and I have chosen one among you to be superior in my place. As for me, I go to the place of my birth to live under the rule of my sister Etheldreda, and to share her labours on earth that I may likewise share her crown in heaven.” She was received with the greatest possible joy by her sister, and though her senior in age and probably also in experience of religious life, she lived for some years in perfect obedience and submission to her, until such time as God, having called Etheldreda to Himself, laid once again upon her shoulders the burden of government. In her office as Abbess she was more than ever watchful over herself and more fervent in her prayers, remembering that she had to give an account to God of many souls besides her own.

After she had governed her monastery to the great edification and contentment of all for sixteen years, mindful of the great sanctity of her sister, she desired to translate the body of the latter to a more honourable resting-place, and to substitute a coffin of stone for the simple wooden one in which Etheldreda had been laid to rest. A fitting church had now been built to receive the body of the venerable foundress, and all that remained was to procure suitable stone for the coffin. Venerable Bede tells how “ St. Sexburga commanded certain of the monks from the adjoining monastery to search out a stone commodious for that purpose. Now, the region of Ely being all encompassed with rivers and marshes afforded no such stones of a convenient largeness. They therefore, taking boat, went to a certain city not



far distant which lay desolate, where presently near the walls they found a coffin of white marble elegantly made and fitly covered with a stone of the same. Perceiving hereby that God had prospered their journey, they with great joy and thankfulness brought the coffin to the Monastery. Now when the sepulchre was opened and the sacred body of the holy virgin and Spouse of Christ discovered, it was found as free from any corruption as if she had been buried the same day. The religious virgins therefore washed the Saint's body, and putting new vestments on it, carried it into the church, placing it in the marble coffin lately brought thither. And, which was very strange, the said coffin was found so exactly fit for the holy virgin's body, as if it had been made on purpose for her. The place likewise of the head, which was distinctly framed, did properly suit with the measure of the virgin's head." On account of this striking testimony to St. Etheldreda's heavenly glory, her feast is usually kept in October on the anniversary of her translation, and not on June 23rd, the day of her death.

After St. Sexburga had performed this office of devotion and love for her sister, she herself was called to her reward at a very advanced age, and her daughter, St. Ermenilda, Werburgh's mother, was, on account of her great humility and other virtues, chosen by her religious sisters, to whom she had so endeared herself, to be their mother and mistress. How long they enjoyed her gentle government is not known, for though she is mentioned in the Martyrology on February 13th, no year for her death is given. St. Ermenilda had one other sister, Earthongata, who, as a young girl, desiring to lead a perfect life, went over to a French monastery with two of her aunts, because at that time there were very few religious houses in England. Of her, Venerable Bede writes as follows: "Many things are related very

miraculous concerning Earthongata, but we will only mention briefly her death and the wonders succeeding it. When the day approached on which she was to be called out of this world to eternal happiness, she went about the monastery visiting the cells of the religious virgins, especially such as were more ancient and eminent for piety, to whose prayers she humbly recommended herself, not concealing from them that she was taught by revelation that her departure was at hand. Now on the same night at break of day, she passed from the darkness of this world to the heavenly light. Many of the monks whose lodgings were adjoining the monastery report that they heard distinctly a melody of angels singing and a noise as it were of a great multitude entering the monastery. Whereupon going forth to see what the matter was, they saw a wonderful great light from heaven, in which that holy soul, when delivered from the prison of her body, was conducted to eternal joys. Three days after her burial they, having a mind to take up the stone which covered her sepulchre and raise it higher, as they were busy about this, a sweet odour of so wonderful a fragrance exhaled from beneath, that it seemed to the religious men and sisters there assisting as if a cellar full of precious balm was then opened."

But to return to St. Werburgh. At the death of her father her brother Kenred was still so young that her uncle Ethelred succeeded to the kingdom. He had a very high opinion of the sanctity and intellectual capacity of his niece, and was most anxious that all the convents in Mercia should be placed under her direction in order that she might establish in them that perfection of religious discipline which to his great edification he had often witnessed at Ely. This, at length, the Saint consented to undertake, though it must have cost her dearly to leave her mother and the peaceful seclusion

she had enjoyed at Ely, to devote herself to the welfare of strangers and to the work of reform, which so often proves a fruitless task. But she did not hesitate before sacrifice, and it was sufficient to her that God had made known to her His will by means of her superiors; while He so blessed her efforts as to make them bring forth fruit a hundredfold. Her uncle, eager in every way to further her pious designs, enabled her to found three new monasteries, one at Trentham, one at Hanbury in Staffordshire, and one at Weedon in Northamptonshire; the latter was a royal palace which Ethelred placed at her disposal.

Werburgh's exalted position in no wise changed the humility which characterized her, and she seemed to be rather the servant than the mistress of those over whom she ruled, putting herself on the same footing as the very least of her subjects, and seeking as far as was compatible with her office to take the lowest place. She carried all her daughters in her heart, loving them as though they were indeed her own children, and teaching them virtue by her own example. She possessed in their fulness the spirit of peace, kindness, joy, and love. She was cheerful in tribulation, overcoming all difficulties by faith, and rising above earthly trials by fixing her heart on heaven. She preferred fasting to feasting, watching to resting, holy reading and prayer to recreation and dissipation. In God she possessed all things: He was her consolation in sorrow, her counsel in doubt, her patience in trial, her abundance in poverty, her food in fasting, her medicine in sickness.

It was no wonder, says her biographer, that her spiritual children rendered her such ready obedience and loving service, for even the irrational creatures obeyed her. There is a famous legend illustrative of this, which is related even by Protestant historians. It happened

that when she was at Weedon, just before the harvest, the cornfields were being greatly injured by a flock of wild geese which the steward had done his best to drive away, but in vain. At last he came to complain of the matter to his mistress. Werburgh, with childlike trust in God, told the steward quite simply to go and call the geese and shut them up in the great barn. The man looked at her amazed, thinking that she must be speaking in jest, and began muttering to himself about the absurdity of such an order. How could he possibly be expected to confine birds in a barn who had wings to carry them to heaven? "Of course," he grumbled, "the instant I come up they will all be off like the wind!" But Werburgh urged the command, telling him again to call them in her name and put them into confinement. He dared not disobey any longer; so off he went to the fields where, as usual, the geese were feasting on the corn. "Go all of you to my mistress!" he shouted incredulously; when, to his surprise, they meekly collected and waddled off in front of him like so many naughty children. Not one of the flock raised a wing, and all were imprisoned in the barn to await Werburgh's pleasure. That night after Matins she prolonged her prayer as usual till after daylight, when very early she was roused from her meditation by a tremendous cackling which came from the geese who were getting tired of their confinement. The Saint, who was kindness itself to all God's creatures, went to set them free, telling them she did so on condition they were never seen again in the place. But one of the farm boys had during the night stolen one of the birds, intending to kill and eat it; the result was that the flock settled on the roof of the church making a dreadful noise, as though demanding restitution of the missing bird. Werburgh either guessed what had happened, or knew by inspiration, for she

found the culprit and bade him release his captive. The boy went off much ashamed at being thus convicted, and restored the missing goose. The Saint then cried out, "Bless the Lord, all ye birds of the air," upon which they flew off without more ado, and no bird of that kind was ever after seen in those parts. "Rightly indeed," exclaims her biographer, "did the birds obey one who had always obeyed their Creator with such zeal and love."

How lowly she was in her own eyes, and how pleasing in the sight of God is known by a miracle of a very touching character. Among the labourers on the Abbey estate was one who was remarkable for his holiness of life. His name was Alnotus. One day some trifling oversight on his part roused the steward's indignation to such a degree that he completely lost his temper and began beating the poor fellow most unmercifully. At that moment Werburgh arrived on the scene, and was naturally much distressed to see the ungovernable temper of her steward thus venting itself on an innocent man. In her eagerness to bring him to his senses, she threw herself at his feet crying, "Spare an innocent man who is far more pleasing than we are to God who seeth all things." The steward, however, who was evidently beside himself, paid no attention; upon which Werburgh turned to God for help, and immediately the offender fell paralyzed to the ground. It was now his turn to cry for mercy, acknowledging his sin with many tears. Werburgh, satisfied with his contrition, restored him to his natural strength. The labourer afterwards became a hermit in the forest of Stow, not far from Weedon, where he was martyred by robbers; and how acceptable he was to God was afterwards proved by miracles.

God deigned to show how much Werburgh was beloved by Him and how much power her prayers had

with Him, by making her the instrument of many miraculous cures upon the sick and maimed. He also endued her with a spirit of prophecy and the power of discerning spirits and reading the secrets of hearts. At length she felt that her useful and holy life was soon to have an end, and she thought well to prepare her daughters for her departure and arrange about the place of her burial. She knew well how devoted the nuns were to her ; each of her monasteries had some claim on her motherly heart ; each would have had her always with them, and she was perfectly aware of the pious rivalry which would arise among them as to the possession of her body after death. She therefore determined to forestall all dispute by choosing Hanbury as her last resting-place, probably because it was the largest, and the nearest to Ely her first monastic home. She gave strict orders on this point, saying that no matter where she died her body was to be taken to Hanbury.

On February 3, 699, the day so long desired arrived—a day which was to put an end to all the toils and pains of earth and admit her to eternal joys : the day of eternity which was to dissipate all shadows and cause the light of eternal glory to shine upon her. Her blessed soul exulted when the summons came to invite her to the Marriage-Feast ; she rejoiced to leave exile for home, a prison for a kingdom, captivity for liberty, the tyranny of this world for the Spouse whom she loved and longed for. She died at Trentham, and her soul was carried by Angels to heaven and admitted among the company of glorious virgins who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth, and who sing the canticle which none but themselves can sing. God willed that she should end her earthly course in this Monastery in order that by a wonderful prodigy He might bear witness to her holiness. The nuns of

Trentham, setting aside the last wishes of their Abbess with regard to her burial-place, determined to keep her precious remains among them at any cost. To those who came from Hanbury to claim the body, they gave a decided refusal, and even went so far as to lock up the coffin in a crypt and set a guard over it. However, the people of Hanbury were equally determined not to be done out of their treasure; and when they heard of the nuns' refusal to give it up, a whole party of them set out to insist on their claim. They reached Trentham in the middle of the night, and, by an interposition of Providence, all the bolts and bars of the Abbey and its crypt opened at their touch. They found the guards overpowered by a deep sleep, and without any opposition were able to carry off the coffin in triumph to Hanbury. Here the holy virgin was buried with great solemnity, while the many miracles which followed clearly showed that her soul reigned in heaven, and that her prayers were powerfully pleading for the people whom she had left in exile to mourn her loss. "In this place," writes a contemporary, "sick persons recover health, sight is restored to the blind, hearing to the dumb, the lepers are cleansed, and persons oppressed with several other diseases do there praise God for their recovery."

On account of these marvels, devotion to the Saint very naturally increased, and the people felt that so great a light should not be buried under a bushel, but should be placed in a conspicuous place in a suitable shrine, where the pilgrims could pay their devotions in a proper manner. They therefore referred the matter to Kenred, King of the Mercians, and younger brother to St. Werburgh. In 704, Ethelred, Kenred's uncle, had abdicated in favour of his nephew, and retired into the Monastery of Bardeney, in Lincolnshire. He had grown more and more tired of government and the burden of secular

affairs. The death of his niece had made him even more eager to devote all his energies to the sanctification of his soul and the acquirement of an eternal crown. He therefore handed over his kingdom to Kenred, and became a simple monk in the Benedictine Abbey that he himself had founded, where, after ten years of exemplary life, he died the death of a Saint. Kenred readily acceded to the request of the people to provide a fitting shrine for his sister, and in 708 he came in person with a great concourse of ecclesiastics and nobles to assist at the translation of the relics. As the body had rested for nine years in the earth, no one expected to find anything but dry bones; what was then their amazement when the holy virgin's body appeared absolutely intact, as though she had but now fallen into a refreshing sleep. Her garments were as spotless and unruffled as though freshly placed upon her, and when the Celebrant, in the sight of all present, removed the veil from her face and a gentle flush was seen upon it like that of a summer rose, a great shout of admiration and thanksgiving rent the air, and the whole crowd praised God for His wonderful works. The priests, clad in the richest vestments, reverently raised her upon their shoulders and carried her to the shrine prepared for her, where as a beacon of light she continued to shed her lustre over her faithful people.

This miracle made a very deep impression on King Kenred, and deepened the desire he had for some time cherished of following in the footsteps of his sister, who had despised all the kingdoms of the earth as dirt in comparison with the pearl of great price which she had obtained. Another occurrence of a less pleasing but not less impressive nature fixed his resolution. Among his suite there was a knight to whom he was greatly attached, who had fought side by side with him in many a battle,



and had vied with him in performing deeds of valour, for both were endowed with great courage. Unfortunately, however, this knight was utterly reckless with regard to his soul, and many and many a time Kenred, who was always good and loyal to his God, had exhorted him to mend his ways and attend to the affairs of his soul as faithfully as he did to those of his King. The knight took the admonitions in good part, but always put off his conversion, saying he would have plenty of time to attend to his soul when he was old and past work. But he was struck down by the plague in the prime and vigour of his manhood, and had most terrible sufferings, doubtless sent him by God to recall him to a better mind. When the King heard of his condition, he hastened to his bedside and begged him with all possible earnestness not to delay his confession and to make his peace with God before it was too late. To these charitable entreaties the sick man only replied that nothing would induce him to go to confession until he got better, for his comrades would laugh at him for being chicken-hearted and doing that for fear of death which he had not been willing to do when in health.

The following day the King determined to renew his efforts to save that unhappy soul, but the grace of God had knocked and knocked in vain, and now the miserable man was a prey to the most frightful despair. He told the King that during the night two beautiful young men had entered his room carrying a book in which were written all the good actions he had ever done, but their number was very small, and none of them were of very great merit. Then a host of demons burst into the room carrying a book of enormous size and weight, containing all the crimes, evil words, and sinful thoughts of his life. The chief of these demons turned to the young

men and exclaimed, "Why stay you here, for you must see that this soul is ours?" "It is true," they answered; "take him and make him partaker of your damnation." "Thus," says Venerable Bede, "died this unhappy, despairing man, and now being for all eternity tormented, he practises without any fruit repentance which he neglected to do in his lifetime, when a short penance might have procured his pardon."

This terrible death made Kenred resolved to secure his own salvation at any cost; and, knowing by experience the very grave dangers and temptations which beset the life of a monarch, he felt inspired to follow the example of his uncle Ethelred, and abdicate in favour of his cousin, after a short reign of five years, during which he had administered his kingdom with great piety and justice. In order that his sacrifice might be the more complete, he resolved to go right away from a country where his name was famous and where he would always be treated with honour. Early in the year 709 he put on pilgrim's garb, and in company of two others set out for Rome, to end his days as a humble suppliant at the Tomb of the Apostles. He was accompanied by King Ina, of the East Saxons, who in all the bloom of his youth left his home, his betrothed, his kingdom, and a people who idolized him, to become the servant of the King of kings. These two arrived in Rome after travelling the whole distance on foot, the journey taking the best part of a year. There, kneeling before the Confession of St. Peter's, they were tonsured and clothed with the monastic habit by the reigning Pontiff Constantius; and after living for some years in the practice of prayer and penance they died in the odour of sanctity and found awaiting them in Paradise the crowns which they had sacrificed in this world that they might wear them for all eternity in the next.

For many a long year St. Werburgh rested peacefully among her faithful daughters at Hanbury; but in 875 England was invaded by the Danes, and it was deemed prudent to carry her precious body to a more secure haven than Hanbury, which was in imminent peril of being ravaged by the pagan invaders. Under no other circumstances would the people of Hanbury have consented to part with their treasure, but they were terrified at the approach of the Danes and dreaded desecration for the still incorrupt body of the Saint. King Alfred the Great was then reigning, and he had given his daughter in marriage to Ethelred, whom he had constituted first Earl of Mercia, the race of its kings being extinct. This pious nobleman had St. Werburgh's shrine conveyed with the utmost care to Chester, where he caused a fine church to be built for its reception, which he amply endowed, and placed canons there to guard the holy virgin's body. This church afterwards became the cathedral of the city, and the inhabitants honoured St. Werburgh as their own special patroness. The Saxon kings and nobles continued to pay homage to the Saint, to visit her shrine, and to enrich it with costly gifts. In the reign of St. Edward the Confessor the Minster was rebuilt on a more magnificent scale by Leofric, another Earl of Mercia, and a most devoted client of the Saint. On the accession of William the Conqueror, Chester was offered to him by his cousin, Hugh Lupus, on condition that he should fairly win it from the Saxons, which after three attempts he succeeded in doing. He it was who, in 1093, replaced the secular canons, entrusted with the care of St. Werburgh's shrine, by a community of Benedictine monks from Bec. It was for the settling and ordering of this monastery that St. Anselm was first invited to England. St. Werburgh seems to have kept a watchful care over

the city committed to her, and the people of Chester ascribed to her intercession their almost miraculous escapes from the ravages of Danes, Scots, and Welsh. Many sick still sought and found health at her shrine, and in 1180, a terrible fire having broken out in Chester which threatened to destroy the city, the inhabitants fled to her for protection ; upon which the monks, taking up her body, carried it in procession to meet the raging flames, which immediately subsided, and the town was saved.

In the course of ages her body fell to dust, probably that it might be saved from pollution, when, in the reign of Henry VIII., the reformers sacked the cathedral and scattered her relics. The shell of her tomb may still be seen in Chester Cathedral. It is ten feet high and embellished with thirty quaint old *bas-reliefs* of the kings of Mercia and others of her ancestors.

But if her relics are lost to us the fragrance of her virtues still lingers around the land of her birth. While she continues to intercede for her countrymen in heaven, the example of her life is still before us to teach us to live like her a life of faith ; to remind us that we have not here a lasting city, but seek one that is to come ; and finally to encourage us so to detach our hearts from this world that after her we may be brought with gladness and rejoicing into the temple of the King.

# ST. LIOBA

(700—779)

## I.—Her birth and early consecration to God.

ST. LIOBA belonged to that noble band of Anglo-Saxon women who, in the seventh and eighth centuries, took so large a share in the propagation of the Faith in heathen lands. Burning with the same enthusiasm and animated with the same virtues as their brother missionaries, they sometimes even excelled them in the patience and heroism with which they bore fatigue and hardship. The self-sacrifice and devotedness requisite for so arduous a vocation were unknown qualities among the heathen, but the Saxon women, penetrated with the true Christian spirit, gladly came forward to take part in so great a work. Every rank of society was represented, ladies of noble rank being especially conspicuous by their number and by the zeal which made them brave all the dangers incumbent on such an enterprise. They were eager to carry the light of the Cross from their own English homes into lands still wrapped in the darkness of paganism; and scarcely was the Faith established in this country when Saxon missionaries set out for Germany to bear into that land the glad tidings of salvation.

The most famous among these missionaries was Boniface, who justly bears the title of Apostle of Germany, and who laboured with untiring zeal in

preaching the gospel and in paving the way for civilization and culture.

Lioba, animated by her lively faith and deeply moved by his noble example, earnestly desired to take part in his great work. She was one of those pure and gifted souls endowed with wonderful strength of purpose, uniting, as we shall see later, the power of a man's mind to the tenderness of a woman's heart. At the time of her birth, the beginning of the eighth century, religion was everywhere most flourishing. Kemble, in his work, *The Saxons in England*, tells us that nowhere had Christianity made so deep and lasting an impression as in England, for we find not only the noblest of the land among the bishops and archbishops, but even warlike kings willingly renounced all worldly grandeur, and, laying aside their crowns, either retired into monasteries or went as pilgrims to the tombs of the Apostles. Then, too, might be seen princesses and noble ladies making choice of the religious state, founding monasteries, and leading many souls to God by the path of self-renunciation. Men of noble birth seemed to find no rest until they had carried the tidings of salvation to distant and savage races ; they hungered and thirsted for a life of self-sacrifice and the crown of martyrdom itself. It was a sublime and extraordinary spectacle, which compels us to believe in the deep, earnest, conscientious spirit of religious fidelity which then characterized the Anglo-Saxon race. The same author numbers thirty Saxon kings and queens who, in the course of two centuries, laid aside their crowns that they might devote themselves undisturbed to a holy and spiritual life. Many of these were ranked amongst the Saints, and crowds of holy missionaries went forth from England to evangelize Holland, Germany, and Scandinavia.

England was then divided into seven kingdoms known as the Heptarchy. St. Lioba's parents dwelt in Wessex, or the kingdom of the West Saxons. This province was divided into two large dioceses, one governed by Daniel, Bishop of Winchester, the other by St. Aldhelm, Bishop of Sherborne. Nowhere in the

land was religious life more flourishing ; the two most famous monasteries being those of Glastonbury, whose foundation tradition ascribed to St. Joseph of Arimathea, and Wimborne, a double monastery for monks and nuns. Ina was the reigning king, who, to satisfy his ever-increasing desire for holiness, at length forsook his throne and went on a pilgrimage to Rome, where he died.

Tinne and Ebba, St. Lioba's father and mother, were both of noble Saxon race. Ebba was related to St. Boniface, but the old chroniclers do not say exactly in what degree. They led holy and God-fearing lives, earnestly striving to keep the Commandments and faithfully to fulfil all the duties of religion. For many years they were childless, and at length, as old age crept upon them, they gave up all hope of transmitting their name to posterity. And yet they never wearied in prayer, imploring from God the fulfilment of their most cherished desire.

One morning Ebba awoke, her mind filled with a most wonderful vision which had been vouchsafed to her in her sleep. She had dreamt that she carried in her breast a church bell, and that, as she stretched out her hand to take hold of it, it rang out in sweet, melodious chimes. Calling her faithful nurse, she told her of the dream ; and the aged slave, moved by a prophetic spirit, said to her : " You will give birth to a daughter whom you must dedicate to the service of God." Ebba promised to make the sacrifice of her child, and soon after gave birth to a daughter, who was baptized Truthgeba, but was always afterwards called Leobgytha, or Lioba, " the beloved one," because she was a special gift from God, and was so universally beloved by all. The good old nurse obtained her freedom as a reward for the accomplishment of her prediction.

Ebba carefully nursed and tended her child, but the thought of having to part with her only treasure was a great trial to her ; yet, mindful of her vow, she never wavered in her resolution, and in due time she took this consecrated little one to the Abbess Tetta to be instructed by her in the spiritual life and brought up in the Abbey of Wimborne.

## II.—She enters the monastery at Wimborne. Her education and character.

The nuns of the eighth century, like those of our own day, bound themselves by vow to a life separated from the world—a life of prayer and labour, which enabled them to raise their hearts above the things of earth and seek those which are eternal. They renounced all that they possessed, and led a life as austere as it was holy. The rules followed by the Anglo-Saxon nuns of that period are remarkable for their prudence, regularity, and austerity tempered by charity. An extract from one which concerns the Abbess gives evidence of this ; it runs thus : “The Abbess should be chosen rather on account of her holiness and wisdom than on account of her nobility of birth. She must train all by her instructions, but must never gainsay her teaching by her own conduct, for inferiors are more easily led by example than by words. The spotlessness of her purity and her self-denial should be so manifest as that all may look to her as their model. Rich in love and goodness, may she rejoice the hearts of all the faithful, may she be assiduous in her attention to strangers and guests, full of watchful care for the sick and a generous benefactor to the poor. Yet she must so temper her benevolence as not to countenance what is wrong by an exaggerated kindness. She must punish the wayward according to those words of the Psalmist, ‘Teach me, O Lord, goodness, discipline, and knowledge’ (Ps. cxviii. 66). The Abbess must ever remember that she has as many characters to deal with as there are souls under her care, and must have regard to the requirements of each,” &c. “For those, who are placed in a monastery to be educated, must be treated with loving affection and kept under discipline. They must be imbued with a holy fear and love of God ; they must be instructed in the duties of religion, and must diligently learn in childhood what will be useful to them in after years. All these arrangements belong to the Abbess, for to her is entrusted, as the head of the family and the mother



of the community, the spiritual and temporal welfare of her children."

Thus we see that monasteries were the "nurseries" of religion, of sound education, and of regular discipline, and the life of a nun was rightly regarded as one of very great happiness. We need not, then, be surprised at St. Lioba's parents consecrating her to God at such a tender age. In those days the highest ambition of parents was to see their daughters "Godes Brydes"; and in order to ensure this they gladly deprived themselves of the joy of their homes and the support of their old age. Mindful of that saying of our Lord, "Suffer little children to come unto Me," they brought their children to Him while their hearts were as yet untarnished by the world, and transplanted them as pure white lilies under the safe shadow of the cloister.

The monastery of Wimborne<sup>1</sup> was situated on the Stour, in what is now the county of Dorset. It had been built by King Ina and his sister Cuthberga, and was surrounded by a high wall. In Lioba's time it was governed by the Abbess Tetta, a lady of royal birth, who was even more distinguished by her virtue than by the nobility of her race. She ruled over her nuns with great wisdom and discretion, and inculcated true perfection more by her example than by her words. Under her watchful care Lioba grew up, and was trained by her in the spiritual life. Taken from the world while yet so young, the child grew up happily ignorant of its dangers and seductions, concentrating all her efforts on the one desire of her heart, which was to become a worthy Spouse of Christ. Nature seems to have endowed her with every virtue, which her life in the cloister served to develop and bring to maturity. She had a tender piety, while at the same time her sweet humility and gentle ways made her much beloved by all, and bore witness to the spotlessness of her pure soul. She was so abstemious that even on festive occasions she hardly relaxed her frugality. No labour seemed too hard or too coarse for her, being

<sup>1</sup> The name signifies "Fountain of wine," on account of the clear and sparkling waters near which it stood.

mindful of the monastic axiom, "If a monk will not work, neither let him eat," while at the same time she diligently applied herself to her studies. She studied Latin, and was able to read the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers in that language. Her letters prove her well grounded in the Latin tongue, and show how thoroughly she had mastered its difficulties.

Yet notwithstanding all her gifts, both natural and spiritual, Lioba in her humility knew nothing of her own virtues, she only saw and thought of those of her sisters, and was always striving to imitate what she saw in others, being eager to learn and to be taught by all.

One night she had a dream in which it seemed to her that a flame-coloured thread was growing out of her mouth, and that when she tried to remove it, more and more came forth, as it were, from her inmost heart. As the rich silken thread began to fill her hand she wound it into a ball which grew larger and larger, until she became weary of winding it and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion and anxiety.

The vision was so deeply impressed on her memory that she could not forget it. It became a continual weight on her mind, for she felt that some mystery regarding herself lay concealed in that dream, yet in vain did she try to fathom it. There was at that time living in the monastery an aged nun remarkable for the prophetic spirit with which God had favoured her, and very highly esteemed by all. Lioba thought of unburdening her heart to this holy religious and seeking from her the real meaning of her strange dream; but natural timidity held her back, and she begged one of the other sisters to go to the nun in question and relate to her the vision as though it had happened to herself and ask for an explanation. The sister complied with Lioba's request; but when she had given all the details of the dream as though relating to herself, her listener replied in a severe tone: "The vision is indeed a true one and betokens a future good; but why have you lied to me, saying you yourself saw the wonder? It does not refer to you, but to God's 'beloved one'" (referring

to her name, Lioba). "This vision was vouchsafed to her on account of her sanctity and wisdom. She will be a help to many, both by the example of her life and by her teaching. The thread which issued from her heart through her mouth betokens the wisdom of her learning, which manifests itself in her exhortations to perfection. The filling of her hand with the thread denotes that whatever she teaches by words, she herself practises by her deeds. Finally, the ball which Lioba wound, and which in consequence of the round shape could be rolled, signifies the mystery of the divine Word, which is at one time diffused over the world in the active life; at another it is exalted on high in the contemplative; while again it urges to suffering for the sake of others, and by means of love causes souls to soar on high to heavenly things. God has revealed by this sign that Lioba will profit many in the world by her words and example—not, however, here, but in the far distant land and among another nation will she dwell until her death."

### III.—Her profession. St. Boniface.

Faithful to the vocation for which her parents had destined her, Lioba, throughout her childhood and youth, bore ever in mind that day so ardently longed for when, having reached the age required by the Church,<sup>1</sup> she might pronounce her sacred vows and receive from the Bishop the veil of a Spouse of Christ. In England, as everywhere else under the ancient discipline, it was the Bishop alone who had the right to receive the vows of a virgin and to consecrate her solemnly to God.

The morning of her bridal day, so long desired, dawned at last for Lioba. The ceremony began by the Bishop blessing the black habit which she was henceforth to wear as her only adornment. It was put on in

<sup>1</sup> The Anglo-Saxon Church forbade the taking of irrevocable vows before the age of twenty-five (Montalembert, *Monks of the West*).

a private room, and then the novice returned to the church, and standing before the altar pronounced her sacred vows, and received the veil from the hands of the Bishop. The prayers used on this solemn occasion have been preserved to us in the Pontifical of Egbert, Archbishop of York, and in an Anglo-Saxon manuscript found in the Abbey of Jumièges. They are too long to be inserted here, but in several places are identical with the ancient rite for the Consecration of Virgins still in use in many Benedictine monasteries at the profession of nuns.

After the prayers followed a long blessing, which almost assumed the form of a litany, as the bystanders united in saying aloud "Amen" after each petition, earnestly begging of God to grant every grace and blessing to the newly professed religious.

The ceremony was over, and the echoes of the last Amen had died away, but a new life had begun for Lioba now that she was bound for ever to her divine Spouse. From that time forth she gave herself no rest; with burning zeal she strove unceasingly after higher perfection, and the fame of her piety and learning spread far and wide beyond the walls of her monastery.

Shortly before this time St. Boniface, who was, as we have already seen, a kinsman of Lioba's, and like her a native of Wessex, had been consecrated Bishop in the year 723 by Pope Gregory II. and sent back to Germany as an "Episcopus regionarius," or Bishop without a fixed see, to preach the gospel to the multitudes as yet plunged in the darkness of heathenism. The whole life of this great Saint was one of prayer and labour; strengthened for his labours by prayer, and spending himself for his divine Master with indefatigable zeal; while he longed for the martyr's crown which he knew would one day be given to him in reward for his fidelity in combating evil wherever he found it, either in heathen lands or among Christians unworthy of the name.

St. Boniface and his apostolic work naturally excited great interest among the religious communities in England, and especially at Wimborne, where he was

well known and had many friends and relations. Lioba, above all, was deeply moved by the accounts of his labours and the wonders wrought by him, and at length ventured to address to him the following letter:—

*“To the Reverend Lord and Bishop, Boniface.*

“Lioba, the last of Christ’s handmaids, sends the immortal greeting of salvation to Boniface her most beloved in Christ, to him who is adorned with the highest dignity of our Lord and bound to her by the ties of kindred.

“I beg your Lordship will deign to remember your early friendship with my father Timme, an inhabitant of Wessex, who has now been dead eight years, for whose soul I beseech your intercession with God. I also recommend to you my mother Ebba, who, as you know, is bound to you by ties of kindred. Her life is passed in suffering, and she has, for a long time, been bowed down by the weight of corporal infirmities. I am her only child and would fain be allowed, though unworthy, to look on you as a brother in whom I have more confidence than in any other of my kindred. I send you this little gift, not that it is worthy of your favour, but that thereby you may ever bear in mind my lowliness, and that distance of place may not obliterate me from your memory. Much more earnestly do I wish that this token may draw closer the bond of true love and that it may endure for ever. I beseech you, beloved brother, to aid me with the shield of your prayers that I may fight against the assaults of the hidden enemy. I would ask you also to deign to correct this unlearned letter and not to refuse to send me a few kind words, which I ardently long for as a proof of your favour. I have endeavoured to compose the following verses according to the rules of poetical metre, though I have little reliance on my skill and only desire to exercise my poetical vein, as yet very weak, showing that in this also I have need of your direction. I have learnt the art from Eadburga, who never ceases to meditate upon God’s holy law. Fare-

well. May you live long and be happy and pray for me always." (Then follow four lines of Latin verse.)<sup>1</sup>

We find no further mention made of the little gift sent with this letter; probably it was some piece of embroidery worked by herself, by means of which she could prove the sincerity of her feelings even better than by her words. St. Boniface responded very heartily to Lioba's appeal, and a familiar correspondence was opened between them; but this is the only letter of hers which has been preserved.

#### IV.—She goes to Germany and is placed over the Abbey of Bischofsheim.

As years went on, in order to complete the conversion and civilization of Germany, St. Boniface determined to invite some nuns to come from England to establish themselves in various parts of the country and provide for the education of their own sex. His thoughts naturally turned to Lioba, whom he knew by her letters, and the fame of whose wisdom and learning had long since reached him. He felt, with reason, that a soul endowed with strength of purpose such as he knew her to possess would be eminently qualified for the task he had in store for her. He therefore addressed a letter to the Abbess Tetta, about the year 748, earnestly entreating her to send Lioba to Germany to be a consolation to him in his pilgrimage, and a help to him in his labours, adding that her learning and virtues were well known to him.

It was a bold request to make, and Tetta may well have hesitated to comply with the desire of the holy Bishop, for the design seemed fraught with innumerable difficulties. It required heroic faith and confidence in God to part with her cherished child, to send Lioba into a half-civilized country for a new foundation in a

<sup>1</sup> "Arbiter omnipotens, solus qui cuncta creavit  
In regno Patris semper qui lumine fulget  
Qua jugiter flagrans, sic regnat gloria Christi  
Illesum servet semper te jure perenni."

place where she would often have no one to turn to for guidance, as Boniface would only be able to pay her very rare visits—to let her go forth from the shadow of her peaceful cloister to brave the dangers of such a journey and the difficulties inherent to such an undertaking. Yet Tetta did not shrink, neither did Lioba, nor the companions who volunteered to accompany her, and with unflinching courage they now left their country at the voice of God as heretofore they had left their parents' homes.

The little band of missionaries numbered about thirty in all ; among them were St. Walburga<sup>1</sup> and St. Thecla, destined for other foundations in the same country. It was a long and tedious journey, and we who live in the days of steamboats and trains can scarcely realize what it meant to cross the sea in rough sailing vessels, to travel on foot or on horseback over bad roads, braving the inclemency of the weather and the very doubtful accommodation which the inns might afford to ladies, all delicately nurtured and unaccustomed to long journeys. They had a very stormy journey before they arrived at Antwerp, where they rested some days before proceeding to Mayence. There they were met with every token of respect and affection by Boniface. Closer acquaintance confirmed the high opinion he had formed of Lioba, and he congratulated himself on the treasure which he had obtained, and promised himself great results from the prayers and example of her and her nuns. He had already prepared a monastery for her reception at Bischofsheim,<sup>2</sup> and very soon she was duly installed there.

<sup>1</sup> St. Walburga, after spending about two years in the monastery of Bischofsheim, under Lioba, was sent to govern a monastery at Heidenheim, founded by her two brothers, SS. Willibald and Winibald. She died in 779, about the same time as St. Lioba. St. Thecla also remained some time at Bischofsheim, and then was sent by St. Boniface to rule over the Abbey of Kitzingen on the Main. Her name does not appear on the list of the Abbesses of this house, but it is supposed that she is the same as "Heilga," or the Holy One.

<sup>2</sup> Bischofsheim signifies "Bishop's house," which looks as if Boniface gave up to the nuns his own dwelling.

Pepin le Bref, the father of Charlemagne, then ruled over that portion of Germany, and did all he could to second the efforts of St. Boniface for the spread of Faith among his subjects. As the field of his labours increased Boniface found it necessary to subdivide the archdiocese, which had now grown too large for one Bishop to administer, and he erected the four bishoprics of Wurtzburg, Eichstedt—of which St. Willibald was named Bishop—Erfurt, and Ratisbon. Bischofsheim, when St. Lioba arrived, belonged to the diocese of Wurtzburg, but was afterwards attached to the archdiocese. The monastery, of which no trace now remains, was so situated that the river Tauber, after running through a deep and narrow valley, passed through the grounds of the Abbey, and, besides supplying it with abundance of water, turned the mill for the nuns.

With the exception of a few cottages, which formed what we should now call the village, the surrounding country was for the most part wild and uncultivated and very thickly wooded.

Very soon after her arrival a large number of young maidens had collected at Bischofsheim under the motherly care of Lioba, who devoted herself to their training with ardent love and zeal, and, assisted by those companions who had accompanied her from Wimborne, she soon succeeded in carrying out the regular observance of the Rule of St. Benedict in her new foundation.

### V.—Her Life at Bischofsheim.

Rudolph of Fulda, St. Lioba's biographer, has left us a simple but touching sketch of our Saint, which gives us an insight into her life and characteristics as Abbess of Bischofsheim. He writes as follows: "A numerous band of God's handmaids was there assembled together led in the paths of heavenly wisdom by Lioba's example, and so fashioned under her guidance that many became teachers in their turn. Indeed, in that country there was hardly a monastery of nuns who did not solicit



Lioba for her pupils to be their teachers. She was endowed with such high virtue, and animated with such courage and strength of purpose in the performance of her duty, that she never seemed to give a thought to the country and to the dearly-loved ones whom she had left behind. She put forth all her energy to the work which she had in hand, and endeavoured always so to act that she might be acceptable to God and an example to her sisters, never teaching them what she did not herself practise. There was nothing of arrogance in her behaviour, nothing of bitterness in her words, but she showed herself kind and affable to all. Her beauty was remarkable, her countenance truly angelic, always sweet and joyful, though she was never known to indulge in laughter. No one ever saw her angry, or heard her say an uncharitable word. She was patient, boundless in charity, and admirable in her understanding. With regard to food, she was always most liberal to others, yet she ate and drank but sparingly herself, as we know from her cup, which, from its diminutive size, her sisters were wont playfully to call '*dilecta parvus*,' or 'the little cup of the beloved one.'

Of her studious habits at Wimborne we have already spoken. At Bischofsheim these were by no means abated, in spite of the press of work entailed by her position as Abbess, so that except when engaged in prayer she was generally to be found with a book in her hands. Instructed from her youth in grammar, poetry, and the liberal arts, she had by her assiduous reading so increased the treasures of her learning that she had committed to memory a great part of the Old and New Testament, and she was familiar with the writings of the Fathers and with the decrees and canons of the Church.

She always insisted that her nuns should take the siesta, or mid-day repose mentioned in the Rule of St. Benedict, alleging that want of sleep and indiscreet austerities tend to blunt the mind and incapacitate it for study. But when she herself lay down to rest she would call one of the novices to read aloud the Holy

Scriptures by her couch, and though she appeared to be sleeping, no word could be omitted or mispronounced without her noticing it. Those whose privilege it was thus to read to her would often relate how, when their mother seemed sleeping, they would purposely make a fault in the reading, but immediately she would open her eyes and correct the mistake. Truly, like the Spouse who dwelt in her heart, she "neither slumbered nor slept," and with Him she could say, "I sleep, but my heart watcheth."

Yet, with all her learning, Lioba was so humble and modest that she ever sought to be regarded as the least in the house. She often acknowledged herself as such, and proved the genuineness of her humility by the lowliness of her deportment in all her dealings with others. Her hospitality was truly Benedictine, her monastery was a shelter for all who needed it without distinction of person; while with her own hands she would prepare food for strangers and the poor, and tenderly wash and kiss their feet.

Lioba was now in the prime of life of firm and vigorous mind; indeed, to govern so young and so large a community, to make a new foundation in a recently converted but half-civilized nation, to train these people in a life so utterly strange to them, to keep in check their naturally strong passions and impetuous characters, unused to the restraint of monastic discipline, sufficiently speaks for her powers of government and of winning souls to God. Lioba governed with a strong hand, yet she made it her chief care to instil into her dealings with her religious a spirit of maternal love and forbearance.

Rudolf, in his preface to her *Life*, says: "I myself did not know of all her good deeds, but some which I have related were imparted to me by venerable men who in their turn had learnt them from four of Lioba's pupils, viz., Agatha, Thecla, Nana, and Eolioba."

Rudolph also gives us some details about the daily life at Bischofsheim. Useless conversations were never allowed, but the Abbess used to devote two hours each day to see any of the nuns in private who might need

help, reprehension, or advice. Silence was everywhere carefully observed, especially in the refectory, except on certain great Feasts. Their food was very simple, consisting of only two dishes and some fruit. Their drink consisted of water or a kind of mead made in the monastery. The cellarer superintended the religious engaged in the kitchen or bakehouse; all the duties there were taken by each sister in turn for a week at a time. They were engaged in manual labour every day, with the exception of Sundays and Feasts, when more leisure was given for prayer and reading. A certain fixed time was daily appointed for needlework, when all worked in common, while the Holy Scriptures were read aloud. Special care was bestowed on the sick; not only on the religious themselves, but also on the sick and aged poor of the neighbourhood, who always received a loving welcome in the monastery; for Lioba bore in mind the precept of the Rule which ordains that "every care is to be taken of the sick, so that they be served in very deed as Christ Himself, who has said, 'I was sick and you visited Me'; and, 'What ye did to one of these My least brethren, ye did unto Me.'"

Such was the exterior training of the nuns of Bischofsheim; with regard to their intellectual acquirements they were very highly educated. They were taught to write and speak in Latin; they studied grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy; and we are told that they applied themselves to the transcription of books with wonderful industry. This assiduous study was well calculated to enlarge and strengthen the mental capabilities of the more highly talented, and we read that the Anglo-Saxon nuns then settled in Germany were renowned for their literary tastes. We must at the same time remember that literature in those days was of a very deep and solid character. There was no light reading: transcripts of the Gospels, of the Psalter, and even of the entire Scriptures multiplied in their silent Scriptoriums; some being wonderfully adorned with illuminations and their bindings studded with gems. We are told how, on one occasion, St. Boni-

face asked the nuns to make him a copy of the Epistles of St. Paul in letters of gold so as to inspire his neophytes with greater reverence for the Holy Scriptures. It was no empty praise which Mabillon gave to the English nuns of that period when he styled them the "peculiar glory of the Benedictine Order."

With regard to their interior life, their life of prayer, their daily tribute of praise to God, we have said nothing; yet the great work of their life was the divine Office, and union with God by means of holy contemplation was the aim of those who, in those days as now, bore the very name of Contemplatives. Thus the first and principal place in the time of the nuns was occupied by prayer and by the solemn and continual celebration of the monastic liturgy. We read that at Wimborne five hundred nuns were always present at the night Office. At Bischofsheim, of course, the numbers were nothing like so great; but the fervour of their prayers pleaded powerfully before the throne of God and brought down from heaven countless graces upon the missionaries, in whose work they were silently yet efficaciously co-operating.

Thus, under Lioba's firm but gentle rule, the nuns lived sweetly and peacefully together; the virtues of the mother urging on the daughters to imitate her, and banishing pride, jealousy, and disobedience from the house of God.

## VI.—Troubles at Bischofsheim. The power of her prayers.

The days at Bischofsheim passed quietly away with their regular round of prayer, reading, study, and labour, and maybe the nuns felt that they were enjoying the hundredfold reward of the double sacrifice they had made for their Divine Spouse. Yet Satan never wearies, and he was cunningly preparing a shaft to aim at their reputation and to destroy if possible their peace of mind. The foul breath of calumny had never as yet troubled Lioba's pure soul, but it is the

crucible through which all the Saints have passed, and now she was to undergo the ordeal and pass through it unharmed. None the less was it a most grievous trial for the community at Bischofsheim. Rudolph of Fulda gives the incident as follows :—

There was at Bischofsheim a poor beggar who through weakness and ill-health was scarcely able to drag herself about. She came constantly to the Abbey for alms, and daily received food, besides clothes and anything else she might want. Unfortunately, through the malice of the devil, the woman was tempted to drown her infant and to throw the body into the river where it ran through the monastery grounds. When the dead body was found suspicion immediately fell upon the nuns and caused great scandal and disturbance in the neighbourhood. When Lioba heard the news she did not give way to sadness or grief at the false accusation, but assembled all her community in the church, and they remained some time in silent prayer before the altar. Then Lioba had the entire Psalter recited aloud, the nuns kneeling meanwhile with outstretched arms to implore the mercy of God. When this was finished she ordered three solemn processions to be made after Terec, Sext, and None, during which the Litanies were to be chanted. Twice the procession had been duly made, and the nuns were preparing again to follow the crucifix borne aloft for the third time when the guilty woman impelled, as it were, by an invisible hand, made her way to the Abbess's side and there loudly proclaimed herself the culprit and acknowledged her sin. The people were filled with admiration at this manifestation of divine power, while the nuns wept for joy, praising God's goodness and Lioba's virtue. Thus it came to pass that her fame, which Satan had tried to injure, was by this very means spread abroad with greater lustre.

Let us now turn to some more pleasing incidents showing the great power of her intercession with God. On one occasion while she was giving a spiritual conference to the nuns a fire broke out in the village, which

quickly spread and destroyed the thatched cottages. The villagers had no means of arresting the flames, which soon threatened the monastery buildings, and the farm servants and the animals were in imminent peril. The terrified people, with cries of distress, hastened to Lioba, imploring her to avert the danger by her prayers. In the face of this peril the saintly Abbess's implicit trust in God was made manifest, and while the panic-stricken crowd hastened hither and thither and the wildest confusion reigned she remained calm and self-possessed. She caused a vessel of holy water to be brought to her, in which she mixed some salt which the holy Bishop Boniface had blessed. Then with unshaken confidence inspired by her lively faith she desired that the water should be thrown on the flames. At once the fury of the conflagration abated and the monastery was saved.

Another time a terrific thunderstorm was raging, the lightning flashed, the wind howled, all the elements seemed let loose, while darkness added to the alarm which prevailed. The farmers hastened to fetch in their flocks to save them from destruction, but as the storm increased in fury the people seemed beside themselves with terror. They rushed from their cottages and fled as fast as they could in the darkness and tempest to the monastery—their only hope in Lioba's prayers. They crowded into the church, where they found her and her nuns, and the holy Abbess exhorted them to be calm and to put their trust in God. Meanwhile she prostrated herself at the foot of the altar in earnest prayer. But a tremendous clap of thunder shook the building to its very foundations, and every one believed that the next shock would bring it to the ground. The people could not contain their dread any longer; they flocked round Lioba begging her to rise and save them, as though she alone was able to ward off the danger. Then her cousin Thecla said to her, "Mother, dear mother, all these poor people look to you for help, will you not rise and implore your Patroness, Our Blessed Lady, to save us from this tempest?" At these words Lioba arose and walked

down the church to the door, which she opened, and bravely crossing the threshold made the sign of the saving cross in the air, invoking three times the mercy of God, that, for the sake of His blessed Mother Mary, He would deign to protect them against the violence of the storm. Her prayer took instantaneous effect, and to the amazement of all present a great calm ensued.

There is another remarkable miracle related by her biographer which illustrates her supernatural power of healing the sick. One of her nuns named Willeswind, who was especially beloved by her for her many virtues and edifying life, was suffering from a very grievous sickness. Her condition became at length so pitiable that her parents, in hope of obtaining some alleviation for her, asked and obtained leave to have her home for a time. But instead of growing better at home she became daily worse, and as she seemed on the verge of death her unhappy parents sent to Lioba to implore her prayers that their daughter might die peacefully. When the saintly Abbess heard of the danger of her child she hastened to her bedside to help and console her. When she arrived she found the relations and friends weeping round the death-bed; the poor child's face was already covered with a cloth, for she was thought to be dead. Lioba quickly removed the cloth, and turning to the bystanders she said, "She is not dead; weep not." Then she sent for some milk, and having blessed it she took her own little spoon and poured a few drops between the lips of the invalid. Willeswind opened her eyes, awakening as it were from a deep sleep, and recognizing Lioba called her by her name. She soon was so far recovered as to be able to return to the monastery. She survived Lioba many years, serving God faithfully, and ended her life in a convent in Thuringia during the reign of Louis le Debonnaire, third son of Charlemagne, about the year 815.

## VII.—Her correspondence with St. Boniface. His martyrdom.

It is not difficult for us to picture to ourselves the holy love and mutual esteem which existed between the two Saints, Boniface and Lioba. Boniface was Lioba's mainstay, her spiritual father and guide, the one to whom she could turn in all her difficulties and doubts, one on whom she could lean in those early days, when as Abbess she may perhaps have felt keenly her inexperience in the guidance of souls of a different race and temperament from those she had been accustomed to live with. He entered into all her trials, and realizing fully the difficulty of her task, she was the one woman whom he permitted to visit him in his monastery at Fulda. There were four hundred monks in this famous monastery, founded by St. Boniface, following the Rule of St. Benedict with great exactness, and most zealous in God's service.

Boniface, in his turn, was often consoled by Lioba and helped by her prayers. In the many disappointments and apparent failures of a missionary, he found always in Lioba a comforter and sympathizer to whom he could from time to time unburden his heart. There is a beautiful letter still preserved which he wrote to her and her community, showing how he looked to them to obtain for him from God courage and perseverance in his arduous labours for the conversion of souls. It runs as follows :—

“I send a greeting of everlasting love to the reverend and most dear Sisters Lioba, Thecla, Cynehild,<sup>1</sup> and all who dwell together with you.

“I conjure and exhort you as my dearest children to continue your prayers on my behalf that, as the Apostle says, ‘We may be delivered from violent and wicked men, for all have not the faith.’ Implore the Lord God, who is the refuge of the poor and the hope of the needy, to deliver us from our troubles and from the allurements of this contemptible world, so that the Divine Word may be spread abroad, the glorious gospel

<sup>1</sup> Cynehild was aunt to St. Lullus, who succeeded St. Boniface as Archbishop of Mayence.



of Christ be magnified, and that the grace of God in me may not be in vain. And as I am the least and the most imperfect of all the ministers whom the Catholic and Apostolic Church has sent to preach the gospel, pray that I may not die sterile in good works and unsuccessful in my mission, but that I may be accompanied by spiritual sons and daughters on my heavenward way: so that when the Lord comes, He may not find me like the slothful servant, who buried his talent, and that on account of my sins He who sent me may not visit me with punishment instead of reward for having laboured in vain. Many whom I believed would stand as faithful sheep on the right hand of the Judge on the great day of reckoning have turned out wicked and obstinate goats, who will be placed on His left. Pray then, my children, that God may strengthen my heart by His almighty power, so that I, an unworthy shepherd whom He hath placed over His people, may not fly like the hireling at the approach of the wolf, but that, following the example of the Good Shepherd, I may endeavour to defend both the sheep and the lambs, that is the Holy Catholic Church with her children, sons and daughters, against heretics, unbelievers, and hypocrites. Moreover, since the present days are evil, be not foolish, but understanding the will of God in your regard be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act mercifully, and be strong. Whatsoever you do, do it out of love, and in the words of the Gospel, 'In patience you shall possess your souls.' Remember the Apostles and Prophets who suffered great things for our Lord, thereby obtaining an eternal reward. Be mindful also of the words of the Psalmist, 'Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but out of them all will the Lord deliver them, and will grant His blessing to those who persevere to the end.'

We have another little note from Boniface to Lioba, unimportant in itself, but which shows us how Lioba acted under obedience to him and subjected to his decision even such a small matter as devoting some of her time to instructing a young girl.

"Boniface, the servant of the servants of Christ, sends

to Lioba, Christ's handmaiden, dearly beloved now and to eternity, his hearty greeting. Be it known to you, beloved Sister, that our brother and fellow-labourer Forhthat has informed us, that by his entreaties he has persuaded you to devote some time to teaching a certain learned maiden if my consent can be obtained. Know then, beloved Sister, that we unhesitatingly consent to whatever you consider advantageous to the person concerned. Farewell in Christ."

Boniface was now growing old, and he felt that the time had come to put into effect a plan he had long cherished of ending his days as he had begun them, as a simple missionary. In the year A.D. 753 he held a Council at Mayence, at which, with King Pepin's consent and the Pope's approval, he consecrated St. Lullus to succeed him as Archbishop, and then, taking him by the hand, he presented him to the assembly and bade them yield reverence and obedience to him in future. He commissioned the new Archbishop to complete the churches which he himself had begun to build in several places, most especially that of the monastery of Fulda, which he had destined for his last resting-place. He implored the King's protection for his clergy and their churches, telling him that they were mostly Saxons, some of them old men who had been sharers in his labours.

When at length all the preparations for his departure were complete, he sent for Lioba to pay her a last farewell. Their interview was most touching, and necessarily made a deep impression on Lioba. He made her promise never to forsake the land of her adoption nor to relax her energy in the work she had so generously begun, but to increase daily and hourly in doing good. "Let not," he said, "the weakness of the body be considered, nor the steady advance of old age count the goal too high, nor think the cost of the attainment too heavy. For the duration of time when compared to eternity is but a short span, and the sufferings of this life are not to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed to us in the world to come." He then recommended her to Bishop Lullus

and to the monks of Fulda, bidding them treat her with all honour and respect. He told them that it was his wish that after her death Lioba's body should rest beside his in the same tomb, and that as, during life, they had served God with a single aim and had shared each other's hopes and laboured in the same cause, so together they might await the day of the glorious resurrection. Again exhorting her never to forsake the land of her pilgrimage, he bade her a last farewell, giving her as a parting token of his affection his monastic cowl.

Boniface set out in A.D. 754 with some fifty companions and made his way to Frisia, where he converted great numbers of pagans. These he determined to baptize with all solemnity on Whitsun Eve, which fell that year on June 5th. He therefore fixed a meeting-place on the banks of a little river near Dookum, where the ceremony was to take place, and went thither the night before with his companions. In the morning they were watching in prayer, awaiting the arrival of the neophytes, when, instead of the expected converts, a furious band of infidels burst upon them. St. Boniface's companions were for making some resistance, as most of them were armed, but the holy old man begged of them to desist and not to rob themselves of a glorious triumph. "Behold," he exclaimed, "the day so long wished for, so ardently longed for has arrived at last."

At that moment the leader of the troop struck at him with his weapon, and he, raising his hand which still held the Book of the Gospels to ward off the blow, the dagger pierced the book and then penetrated to his heart. This book was found afterwards soaked in his blood, and was taken to Fulda, where it was, and is still, preserved as a most precious treasure. When the pagans had put all to the sword they began to search for booty; but to their disgust they found that all the Bishop's baggage consisted, not of gold or silver, but only of books and relics, which they left as so much refuse scattered about the field.

St. Boniface was seventy-five years old at the time of his martyrdom. His body was carried first to Mayence, and afterwards was translated by St. Lullus to the

Abbey church of Fulda, in accordance with the Saint's own wishes. There it has reposed in peace ever since, the object of universal veneration. The number of miracles wrought at the shrine is almost incredible.

The news of the martyrdom soon spread abroad and filled all with consternation. For none realized how much they had lost in Boniface until he had gone beyond recall. On no one, perhaps, did the blow fall more heavily than upon Lioba, even though she had such a strong presentiment of it. But Lioba was brave and tried in virtue, and a trial such as this brought out all that was heroic in her character. She could find it in her heart to rejoice with utter unselfishness over the glory of her kinsman and spiritual father and friend, and as she had left her home and country at the request of Boniface, but not for his sake, so she now turned with absolute trust to her Lord and Spouse who had called her to follow in his footsteps, and taking up her cross with renewed vigour, now that it had grown the heavier, she pressed onwards with unflinching heart.

#### VII.—Her foundations—Her friendship with Queen Hildegarde.

Lioba was now entering on what we may call the third period of her life. The first, as we have seen, had been passed in the peaceful cloister of Wimborne under the watchful care of the Abbess Tetta. There she had prepared herself, by exercising herself in virtue and by the practice of the Rule of St. Benedict, for the task which lay before her. Then a complete change had come over her life; she went forth from home and country, and her light had been set upon a mountain that it might shine before a heathen nation, and serve as a beacon to attract souls to God. But she was not alone in that foreign land at first. For seven years she had laboured under the direction of the holy Bishop Boniface. Now he was dead, and Lioba had still twenty-four years of life before her, during which she was to toil and strive for her own sanctification and for the salvation of her neighbour.

How unweariedly she worked we may judge from

the results ; for during that time she founded a great number of monasteries. These she constantly visited, especially at the beginning of their foundation, in order to set them on a firm footing and ensure in them the exact observance of religious discipline. While she lived the nuns in their respective monasteries always looked to Lioba as their mother, and turned to her for advice and support, help and encouragement in all their difficulties, both spiritual and temporal. The temporal difficulties cannot have been few. Even in the present time we know the many trials incumbent on new foundations, but in those days, when religious houses mainly depended for their sustenance on their own lands, we cannot but marvel how St. Lioba managed to provide for all her monasteries of nuns.

Doubtless she was assisted very much by her friends and benefactors, not the least of whom was Pepin, King of the Franks, and his two sons, Carloman and Charles. Apart from the fact that she was of royal blood, and therefore entitled to their esteem and consideration, she had won their admiration by her holiness, coupled with so great a mind and so great a power of administration. Her fame had spread abroad in Germany, and many a knight came forward to offer her either a site for a new house or some rich plate or other valuables for the adornment of her churches. Probably too, in many cases, the owners of the properties on which the nuns had settled would, in the spirit of chivalry which animated that age, watch over the little band of the weaker sex who had come to live under their protection.

The Bishops, too, seemed to have regarded Lioba as an oracle, and consulted her in the weightiest matters, even in questions of theology and ecclesiastical affairs. After the death of Boniface, a dispute having arisen between Sturm, the Saint's favourite disciple and first Abbot of Fulda, and St. Lullus, his successor in the archdiocese, on the subject of certain privileges, it was to Lioba they turned to settle the contest, and willingly submitted themselves to her arbitration and judgement in the matter.

Lioba, as a rule, made her headquarters at Bischofs-

heim, and always returned there, as to a home, after the many fatiguing journeys she was obliged to undertake for the foundation and supervision of her convents. When on her homeward way she seldom failed to turn her steps towards Fulda to venerate the relics of the great Martyr, and to pour out her heart in prayer before his shrine, gathering there the strength she so much needed. It was the law of the monastery that no woman should ever pass the threshold, but the monks continued to make an exception in her favour ; for had not Boniface, their glorious founder, committed her to their care? and had he not expressly stated that he wished her to be buried in his own grave? and thus make Fulda her last resting-place? So it came about that whenever Lioba visited the Abbey she would leave her companions in a hospice close by and, taking with her but one elder nun, she would enter the enclosure and be permitted to assist at the divine Office and conferences, and to watch by the tomb of her spiritual Father. Then, as the shades of evening fell, she would leave the cloister refreshed and comforted and rejoin again her companions in the hospice, where the monks would send them food from their own table.

At one time we read that St. Lioba and her nuns fell into dire poverty and that the holy Abbess was in the greatest distress to find support for her monasteries, but the chronicler does not tell us how this happened. In her anxiety she turned to St. Lullus, to whom St. Boniface had specially entrusted her, and he wrote her the following letter :—

“Lullus, the humble minister of Christ endowed with authority by Bishop Boniface, sends greeting in the Lord to Lioba, our dearly-loved Sister in Christ.

“I am convinced that in your wise zeal you are not unmindful of that saying of the Gospel, wherein it is written : ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ This poverty consists in enduring in patience, as the same Gospel affirms : ‘In patience you shall possess your souls.’ Take to heart also that sentence of holy David : ‘According to the multitude of my sorrows the consolations of the Lord will rejoice my soul.’

“Think not, dear Sister, that we forget you or that we are unmindful of you though absent from one another in body. Do not imagine that I tire of hearing of your distress, but know that I also am harassed and fatigued by the craft of the evil one, and by the malicious attacks of his ministers. Because of these sons of iniquity I can well say with the Prophet that my life is a burden to me. Let me know by the deacon Grundwin whatever you stand in need of ; and do you beg of him not to grow weary of helping me in my labours, for there are very few who will share my trials with me. Farewell in Christ. Intercede earnestly for me, because my burden and distress daily increase.”

Yet in the midst of her many difficulties and trials Lioba was not without her consolations. Among these may be reckoned the holy friendship which existed between her and the queen Hildegarde. Hildegarde was a Suabian by birth, and was Charlemagne's second wife. This good queen loved Lioba as her own soul, and was never so happy as when in her company, profiting by her words and example and seeking her advice in her most important concerns. She was anxious to keep Lioba always by her side, but a court life had no attractions for the humble nun, and though she was compelled to present herself from time to time at Herstal, from motives of charity and on business connected with her foundations, she would make as little stay as possible, and, urging that the place for an Abbess was in her monastery with her nuns, she would hurry back to Bischofsheim.

At last, when she had been Abbess of Bischofsheim some twenty-eight years, she earnestly sought to resign her dignity in order to end her days in solitude, that she might devote herself to a fervent preparation for death by redoubling her prayers and penances. She consulted Bishop Lullus on the matter, telling him she had now firmly settled all her monasteries, that her work was done, and that she was most anxious to lay down the cares of government. He acceded to her request, and recommended her to go to Schönersheim, a house situated about four miles from Mayence.

Schönersheim signifies "the home of the beautiful," and was a fitting place for God's "beloved one" to pass her closing years.

Pepin died A.D. 758, and only three years later his eldest son Carloman followed him to the grave. Thus Charles, or "Charlemagne" as he has been called by posterity, was left sole master of the empire. He fixed his court at Aix-la-Chapelle. Shortly before Lioba's death royal messengers were dispatched by his Queen, Hildegard, begging Lioba to come to her. She was old and feeble to undertake such a journey, but mindful of the faithful friendship which had grown up between them, and of the many favours she had received from the Queen, Lioba set out at once in answer to the summons. She was received at Aix-la-Chapelle with every possible mark of honour and affection. Hildegard was overjoyed by her presence, and could not bring herself to part with her; she therefore used every means of persuasion to induce her to prolong her stay. But Lioba entreated to be allowed to return to her monastery, and no pretext could prevail on her to prolong her visit at the court.

The parting between the two friends is touchingly described by her chronicler. Lioba, taking leave of the Queen, kissed her again and again, saying: "Farewell, most precious part of my soul, my lady, my sister, my dearly loved one! May Christ our Creator grant that we may meet each other in the Day of Judgement without confusion, for in this life we shall see each other no more." Her words were realized, for they never met again.

#### IX.—Her death. Miracles at her shrine. Her relics.

Lioba returned from her visit to Aix-la-Chapelle much fatigued, and after a few days she was obliged to take to her bed. As her weakness and sufferings daily increased, she realized that the time of her happy release could not be far distant, and she asked for the last rites of Holy Church to strengthen her on her passage to eternity. A priest named Sorabent, who



was, like herself, a Saxon, and who "always had remained with her and served her with love and reverence," was summoned to her bedside and administered to her the Sacraments of Extreme Unction and the Holy Viaticum. And so, comforted and refreshed, Lioba joyfully awaited the summons of the divine Bridegroom, which came to her on September 28, 779,<sup>1</sup> when her pure soul, unsullied by sin, and freed from its earthly fetters, took its flight to heaven and found rest in the eternal embrace of the Beloved.

The monks of Fulda had not forgotten St. Boniface's express wish that St. Lioba should be buried beside him. But as so many years had elapsed since his death, they feared to open the holy Bishop's grave; and having consulted together, they agreed to bury her on the north side of the altar which St. Boniface himself had consecrated in honour of the twelve Apostles. The monks therefore set out for Schönersheim to fetch the sacred relics, and brought their precious burden all the way to Fulda in solemn procession. Many knights and noblemen joined the monks, besides a large concourse of the country people, eager to accompany the Saint on her last journey and pay a farewell tribute of affection and respect to one they had so greatly honoured.

Among the wonderful miracles worked at her shrine we select the two following, related by Rudolph of Fulda: A certain criminal who, in punishment of his crimes, had had his right arm encircled with an iron ring, came to Fulda. The ring was riveted so tight that it eat into his flesh and caused him great pain. As he was praying before St. Lioba's grave the Saint, who had ever been so compassionate to every form of suffering, took pity on him, and by an invisible power caused the ring to snap suddenly and to fall to the ground. Inexpressibly relieved, and his heart overflowing with joy, the penitent man loudly proclaimed his gratitude to God and his sorrow for his past sins, trusting in the divine mercy, that as he had been freed from his iron band through the merits and intercession of the Saint, so he might also be delivered from the eternal punishment due to his many crimes.

<sup>1</sup> Mabillon assigns 772 as the date of her death.

In those days the Church sometimes enjoined a seven years' penance for very serious crimes, during which time the penitent was compelled to wander in exile, clothed in a woollen garment and living on bread, water, and herbs. King Ethelwolf, father of Alfred the Great, obtained a commutation of this kind of penance for his subjects from Rome ; and it was decreed that no Englishman was to suffer the punishment "in irons" outside his own country. But the people were so tenacious of this custom abroad that, although prohibited by Charlemagne, it was still in use in the tenth century.

The second miracle we will recount is a wonderful cure which St. Lioba obtained for a Spanish pilgrim. He was suffering from an incurable palsy which so grievously afflicted him that, seeing no human help could avail him, he turned in his anguish to God and His Saints and made many pilgrimages, hoping to obtain his cure in some hallowed spot. At length he came to Fulda and was received into the hospice there. After he had been three days in the place, and had prayed, first before one altar and then before another, he came to St. Lioba's shrine, and having finished his devotions there, he passed on to the crypt where St. Boniface lay buried. There he threw himself on the ground and fell asleep. As he slept the shaking in his limbs ceased, as the monk Firmandus took note of. This monk had helped the sick man, as he could not stand alone, and he was so struck by what he saw, that when some of the bystanders wanted to raise the sleeping man from the ground he dissuaded them, telling them to wait and see the completion of the miracle. Presently the Spaniard awoke and got up perfectly cured. When questioned, he replied, "I became unconscious, and in this state I saw a man of venerable aspect wearing the pallium, and he was accompanied by a lady dressed like a nun. The lady took me by the hand and led me to the Bishop that he might bless me. The Bishop made the sign of the cross on my breast, and immediately a blackbird, which seemed to turn into a hideous demon, flew out from the folds of my cloak and disappeared into the crypt."

We will now finish our life of this holy English virgin

with a short and necessarily rather an incomplete account of her relics. The church at Fulda has been several times rebuilt, but the body of St. Boniface still lies in the ancient crypt, which has been preserved intact, and the pilgrim may still see the ivory crozier he was wont to use and the dagger which won for him a martyr's crown.

St. Lioba's body was translated by the Abbot Eigel, when he enlarged and reconsecrated the church, to the Chapel of St. Ignatius the Martyr in the east aisle, where it continued to attract numbers of pilgrims. In A.D. 837 a large portion of her relics was taken to the church of Petersberg, near Fulda, a church consecrated by the famous Benedictine Abbot Rabanus Maurus; but there are documents dating from the fifteenth century which prove that some of her relics were still preserved at Fulda. Only a very small portion can, however, now be traced owing to the lapse of time, the ravages of war and fire, and the rebuilding of the church; also the great demand for them which has much diminished them and which proves the great veneration in which her memory was held. Thus we read that Rabanus Maurus alone gave some of her relics to no less than five monasteries and churches which were eager for them. These gifts may be verified by the inscriptions still extant which Rabanus Maurus himself wrote for the altars of these churches. The following is an example taken from the Lady altar of the Church of Hersfeld: "O holy Virgin, who didst bear and nourish the Saviour of the world, watch over this altar, bestow thy favours upon it, for it is dedicated to thee and to other holy virgins. May they all hear the prayers of this thy people! May the Virgins Agatha, Cecilia, Lioba, and Juliana ever abide with us!" Here we have a striking testimony to the high honour in which St. Lioba was held, since not fifty years after her death we find her ranked among the most esteemed of the virgin martyrs of holy Church.

Of the history of the Abbey of Bischofsheim after the death of St. Lioba nothing is known. Every trace of its existence seems lost until 1631 or 1636; the Franciscans built a convent on the spot hallowed by tradition, and revived devotion to the Saint, bringing to her church a

portion of her relics ; a detailed account of this is given in a manuscript which dates back to the year 1683. In this document is mentioned the first translation of St. Lioba's relics to the church at Petersberg and the veneration in which they were held. It then goes on to say that they were brought back to Fulda, and that her skull was enshrined in a costly casket set with pearls and precious stones. In 1665, as the Father Provincial of the Franciscans was making a visitation of the province of Thuringia, he passed by Fulda, and begged from the Abbot a portion of St. Lioba's relics for the friars at Bischofsheim. His request having been acceded to, the relics were carried thither with great pomp, and a new church was built in which the high altar was dedicated by the friars to the memory of St. Lioba. The Franciscans continued to be the faithful guardians of their treasure until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when their convent was seized by the Government. The church, however, is still standing and is attached to a college. Over the altar is a large picture, painted in the seventeenth century, in which is depicted the miracle connected with the finding of the dead body of the child in the river, mentioned in her life. St. Lioba is represented in this picture wearing the Benedictine habit. Over the entrance to the college is a statue of the Saint, in wood, also clothed in her cowl. In one hand she holds the abbatial staff, the insignia of her office ; in the other hand she holds a book, the symbol of her great learning. A bell rests upon the book in allusion to her mother's wonderful dream before her birth.

Lioba's wise and gentle spirit still seems to linger around the scene of her earthly labours, and she is justly looked up to by the students of Tauber-Bischofsheim as their patroness ; for was she not the first to plant the Cross on the banks of the Tauber, and to raise there the standard of learning and science ?

But if Germany may truly rank her among its apostles, we can also claim a share in her intercession as a truly English Saint, and therefore one whose heart still yearns for the conversion of her country and the sanctification of her countrymen.

## SAINT WALBURGA

(710-777)

As our great empire extends itself over so large a portion of the world, and as peoples of every race and colour come to group themselves beneath our flag, we are compelled to combat our naturally insular spirit and open our hearts in some degree to other nations and other lands, making their interests our own. Enterprise and commerce no doubt tend to make us larger minded, while philanthropy also is a powerful factor to interest us in our fellow-creatures, in their civilization and in their improvement. But the royal road to large-heartedness in its fullest and truest sense is that love of God which causes us to make His interests also ours. We then love the world because He created it, and we love all creatures because He redeemed them. We long for His glory and the extension of His kingdom, and we do not stop to consider whether the creature is Jew or Gentile, Roman or Greek, whether the place be Europe or Africa, Asia or America; it is sufficient for us that the creature is God's, the fruit of His Redemption, and that all the uttermost parts of the earth are His creation. Our

ancestors show forth by their apostolic spirit the truth of this assumption, for though they had neither books nor newspapers, neither telegraphs nor phonographs to bring other countries and other peoples as it were before their very eyes, and though commerce and philanthropy had taken no root in Saxon hearts, yet the fact remains that many of the great missionaries of Europe were men—aye, and women—of English birth. How can we account for this? It was the love of God which was the motive power, the incentive which drove them from a country as dear to them as it is to us into regions of which they knew absolutely nothing, beyond the certainty that they were inhabited by people with immortal souls whom Christ had redeemed, and yet who had no one to apply to their thirsty souls the precious Blood which had been shed for them. “Oh!” exclaims a quaint old writer, “not without reason were the British called Angles; Angels they were in very deed, for an angel is a messenger, and what country has ever produced so many messengers of peace, angels of the Gospel, apostles of the nations?” The great field of our missionary labours was undoubtedly Germany and the Low Countries, and the gift of faith which that people owes to us forms the strongest link among many lesser ones binding together the two great nations of England and Germany.

The life of St. Walburga, which we are about to sketch, lies necessarily very much on the same lines as that of St. Lioba.<sup>1</sup> They were cousins, and went together to Germany for a like purpose. Yet Walburga has always been the more popular saint of the two, and she has a marked personality which will not be

<sup>1</sup> Published by the Catholic Truth Society. Price 1d.

without interest. Her intercourse with her saintly brother and her faithful attachment to him is one of those touching episodes in the lives of the saints which appeals so forcibly to us ; while the miraculous oil which continues to exude from her relics, working wonders even in our own times, proves how dear she is in God's sight, and how powerful is her intercession with Him.

There are, of course, very few facts remaining to us regarding the intimate life of this saint ; for a nun is meant to be a hidden saint. In this does her heroism lay, that she must pray, work, and suffer, and must endure a daily crucifixion in solitude and silence. "In silence and in hope shall her strength be." It is therefore impossible, except in very rare cases, to give at all an adequate idea of the life of a contemplative nun. All we can do is to define the broad lines and catch here and there a light and shade which serve to show us how much that is great and noble must underlie the little that we can see. Considering our scanty knowledge of St. Walburga's life, the fact that her memory is still held in such veneration is all the more striking ; an aroma hangs around her yet, a sweet odour which centuries have not succeeded in dissipating. Let us inhale the perfume, and cause it to sink into our hearts, enkindling devotion to a virgin saint who was a true Englishwoman, animated with that apostolic spirit which results from a supreme love for God and a consuming zeal for the souls for whom He died.

We must now ask our readers to go back in spirit some thousand years or more to an English home in Devonshire, to the castle of one of the petty Saxon kings, Richard by name ; a true type of a Christian ruler and father, his deep reverence for God and His

laws giving even to his exterior appearance that gravity and humility so well befitting one in authority.

His wife Winna, a sister of St. Boniface, was beautiful, gentle, and pious, her husband's helpmate, the seconder of all his wishes. God blessed their union with three children, destined like them to be numbered among the saints: Willibald, born in 701; Winebald, in 704; and Walburga, in 710. When Willibald was scarcely three years old he was struck with a mortal disease. The anguish of his parents may be better imagined than described; he was their eldest son, the object of their hopes and the darling of their hearts. Yet their confidence in God never faltered, and the depth of their virtue was proved in the hour of trial. In the courtyard of the castle was a great cross, much venerated by the whole neighbourhood. Before this image of the Crucified the father and mother laid their dying child, prostrating themselves at the same time, with a strong cry to God for mercy and assistance. Their faith was not in vain; as they prayed the child was suddenly restored to health and vigour, a vigour which he retained till his death at the ripe old age of eighty.

On account of this miracle, the parents felt that their child belonged to God in a very special manner, and made a vow to consecrate him to the divine service. When Willibald was five years of age they took him to the Abbey of Waltham, near Winchester, and entrusted him to Abbot Egbald, a man of great holiness, to be trained to monastic observance. Here the boy far outstripped even the promise his childish years had given of future holiness; and as he grew in wisdom and age he astonished his masters by his virtue and intelligence.



Meanwhile his younger brother Winebald was being brought up in his own home ; he was of a less active temperament than Willibald, and his contemplative mind gave him early a taste for solitude and retirement. The usual pastimes of youth had no attraction for him, and though as heir to his father's kingdom and as the only son at home life must have presented itself to him under the most agreeable form, yet from the outset his heart was set on a kingdom which is eternal and on pleasures which never decay. When he was six years old his little sister was born, and was christened Walburga, which is equivalent to the Greek "Eucheria," and means "gracious." Her name was admirably chosen, for she was gracious in body and mind. Some authors think that her mother died when she was an infant, for her father is said to have loved her all the more tenderly, seeing in her a perfect reproduction of his dead wife's beauty of feature and virtue of character. In any case the brother and sister were thrown much together, and became everything to each other. Walburga looked up to Winebald with loving reverence ; and he used his influence to lead her on in the way of perfection, teaching her to give her whole heart to God, and to seek His will and pleasure before all.

In 721, Willibald, then about twenty years of age, conceived a most earnest desire to visit the Holy Places. Pilgrimages were very much in favour among the Saxons, and the hardships, difficulties, and dangers attendant on such expeditions only fired their enthusiasm the more. Having obtained the necessary leave from his superior, Willibald set out for his home, where he thought he might persuade Winebald to join him. The prospect of visiting the very place where Christ had

been born, where He had lived and died for us, appealed strongly to Winebald's tender, loving nature, yet he felt loath to leave his father, who was old and leant on him; in fact, he shrank from even suggesting such a plan. Willibald, however, all on fire with eagerness, had no such scruples, and going to his father, laid their design before him. He spoke so eloquently of the glory of leaving all for Christ, and of sacrificing everything for His love, that the good old man not only gave his consent to the departure of his sons, but, after due deliberation, determined himself to accompany them.

Poor Walburga! she was but eleven years old, and the prospect of such a parting must have cost her bitter tears. She knew that it would most likely be months before she received any tidings of the wayfarers; that her father was old and might not be able to withstand the hardships incumbent on so long and dangerous a pilgrimage; and that Winebald, her inseparable companion, was himself of a delicate constitution, unaccustomed to exposure. Still, child as she was, she would not raise a finger to stop so holy a purpose; had she done so, her father would never have decided to leave her. So she determined not to be outdone in generosity, and signified to King Richard her resolve to enter a convent, and there dedicate her virginity and the freshness of her young life to God. Her father was much consoled by her decision, and himself escorted her to the great abbey of Wimbourne, in Dorsetshire, which had lately been founded by Queen Cuthberga. This royal lady was wife to King Aldfred; but her heart was wounded with Divine love, and the desire to embrace the poverty and humility of Christ grew so strong within

her breast that, unable to contain it, she sought with earnest entreaties the permission of her husband to retire into a monastery. He was not willing to be an obstacle to so evident a call from God, and gave his consent. Cuthberga then entered as a simple nun into the monastery of Barking, where for some years she lived in subjection, a model to her sisters of discipline and regularity. After some time she received a visit from her brother, King Ina, who unfolded to her a plan he had conceived for the foundation of an abbey in his kingdom and his desire that she should preside over the new community. This, with the approval of her superiors, she consented to do, and before long a monastery was built at the king's expense and a community settled in one of the most beautiful and fertile spots in England.

The great double monastery of Wimbourne soon became famous for the holiness of its inmates and the austerity of its discipline, which was surpassed by none. Some idea of the rigour of its observance may be gathered from the following passage, taken from *The Monks of the West*: "At Wimbourne the two monasteries rose side by side like two fortresses, each surrounded by battlemented walls. The austerity of primitive discipline existed in full vigour. The priests were bound to leave the church immediately after the celebration of Mass. Bishops themselves were not admitted into the convent, and the abbess communicated with the world to give her orders to her spiritual and temporal subjects only through a barred window." It was to this formidable-looking place that King Richard brought his little daughter, and after embracing her tenderly and gazing for the last time on the sweet purity of her innocent face, he gave her

into the keeping of the Abbess and departed never to return. The doors of the enclosure shut upon Walburga, and for twenty-six years she was destined never to cross the threshold.

The new life upon which she now entered seemed, no doubt, very strange to the young English princess, brought up as she had been in all the freedom of home life with her father and brothers. But she was naturally clever, and took to her books, and her talents were fostered by the watchful Abbess, who caused her to be carefully trained in solid learning and such accomplishments as were suitable to her state. Of these twenty-six years at Wimbourne no facts are recorded. We can only gather from the accounts we have of the life there in general what hers in particular must have been. There was a very high intellectual standard among the nuns of Wimbourne at that period. They wrote Latin and Greek fluently, and the easy way in which they quote from the classics proves their familiarity with them. They were famous, too, for their elaborate illuminations and transcriptions of Missals, Breviaries, and the sacred Scriptures—tasks which they undertook for St. Boniface, St. Aldhelm, and others who applied for them. They excelled also in a special kind of embroidery called English work, interwoven with gold and silver thread and encrusted with precious gems. This record of a busy life of prayer and praise, mingled with study and manual labour, sounds all that could be desired, and perhaps people may think that to be a saint under such circumstances and in such a safe retreat was easy enough. Yet we must not forget the truth which Montalembert has so well expressed when he says that “even in the

safe bark of a monastery, how many storms and perils and sunken rocks are within! In the midst of the most peaceful and best regulated community, what a trial is there in the daily death of the individual will, in the long hours of obscurity and silence which succeed to the effort and impulse of sacrifice, and in the perpetual sacrifice perpetually borne, perpetually renewed! —the continuity alone of the exercises, which, though varied, have something in them which goes against human inclinations, and from the moment that they are done by rule and for the service of God become fatiguing. The difficulty must be met and surmounted day by day. This is the great exertion and also the great merit of claustral life.”

Another feature of conventual life which to Walburga must have been specially trying was the very large number of her companions. She had been accustomed, as we have seen, to all the luxuries of an only daughter, with none to cross her path or rival her in any way; she now found herself with eight hundred others, of every rank of life, of character as varied as their countenances, and she realized the truth of her holy Founder's words, that “it is a hard and difficult task to accommodate oneself to the humours of many.” Yet her natural sweetness here stood her in good stead, and she learnt to bear patiently with the weakness of others, and “not only to follow what she thought profitable to herself.”

Walburga had not been a year at Wimbourne when the tidings reached her of her father's death at Lucca, where the pilgrims had stopped on their way to Rome. The hardships of the journey, the exposures and privations, proved too great a tax on the age and constitution of the king, and his strength could not keep pace with his faith

and courage. He was laid to rest in the church at Lucca by his two sorrowing sons, and his body was held in great veneration by the people of that city on account of the miraculous favours obtained through his intercession. In later years over his tomb was placed the epitaph of which the following is a translation: "The king St. Richard was a king of England, a voluntary exile from his country, a despiser of the world, a contemner of himself. He was father of two holy men, St. Willibald and St. Winebald, and of St. Walburga, their sister, a religious virgin. He quitted a king's crown for life eternal. He put off his royal purple to take a mean habit, he forsook a royal throne to visit the shrines of the saints, he laid by his sceptre and took a pilgrim's staff. He left his daughter Walburga in his kingdom and went into a foreign country with his sons. After many internal combats, after frequent and painful sufferings from hunger, thirst and cold, all his conflicts ended in the province of Italy and city of Lucca; there he received his reward, there he was received into heaven and his sacred members were placed near the body of St. Frigidian, where his glory shone abroad by many miracles. His feast is solemnized on February 7th."

Meantime the two brothers continued their journey, and arrived in Rome on November 11, 722. They were hospitably received by the Benedictine monks, and Winebald determined, now that his father was gone to his rest and had no longer need of him, to follow the example of his brother and embrace monastic life. Even as a novice his fervour was so great and his virtue so deeply rooted that he rivalled the holiness of St. Willibald, who had borne the yoke from his youth. The following year the brothers were both attacked with fever,

and were very seriously ill. Willibald had a strong constitution, and was able in time to throw off its effects, but Winebald, who was of a weaker temperament, never completely recovered, and for the rest of his life remained sickly in health, though his naturally high and courageous spirit never allowed him to dispense himself from the severe rules of religious life. Winebald's delicate health induced Willibald to set out alone for the Holy Land, while Winebald remained quietly in the monastery at Rome, his time devoted to prayer and study. After seven years spent in this retreat he returned to England, desirous, no doubt, of paying a visit to his sister, who had now reached the age when it became necessary for her to decide on her future state of life. Finding her strong in her vocation, and making rapid progress in the way of perfection, it is probable that Winebald had the consolation of assisting in person at her solemn profession and consecration. How whole-hearted was the sacrifice made by Walburga the rest of her life will show.

Winebald was received with every possible mark of affection and welcome by his people, among whom he laboured for a time, exhorting them to seek after a higher and a better life and to set their hearts on things which are eternal. Though entreated to stay longer, he would not tarry; he was a monk, and longed for his monastery, even while among the people and in the country which by every natural tie were his own, and he returned to Rome, where he remained seven years more. At the end of this period St. Boniface came there to seek for fellow-workers for his great apostolate in Germany. An intimate friendship arose between him and his nephews, and Winebald was prevailed on to accompany his uncle to Germany, there to found a

monastery in company with other monks and to work for the conversion of that country.

Soon after these events Willibald returned from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and settled down at Monte Cassino, where for ten years he lived a very model of monastic virtues, beloved by all his brethren. Boniface, however, not content with one nephew, desired to secure the other, and wrote to ask the reigning Pontiff to send him Willibald. Willibald, in happy ignorance of what was passing, had come to Rome as companion to a Spanish monk who desired him for a guide in visiting the holy city. The Pope, hearing of his arrival, sent for him and told him that he desired him to go to Germany. Willibald, who had learnt to love his monastic home at Monte Cassino, was somewhat taken aback at such a proposal, and answered that he must seek advice and leave from his Abbot. But the Holy Father would not be put off, telling him that his commands must overrule even those of his Abbot. Whereupon Willibald generously made the sacrifice, and set out for the new field of his labours.

Walburga had now spent twenty-six years in her convent at Wimbourne, and no thoughts of leaving it had ever crossed her mind. She had no ambition save that of more perfect subjection and humility, and a more perfect union with God hidden in the obscurity of the cloister. One day, however, a letter arrived from St. Boniface which caused no little excitement in the monastery, for it was destined to make a great change in the lives of many of its inmates. He asked in his letter that Lioba his cousin, Walburga his niece, and as many others as could be spared, should come to Germany to make a foundation in his diocese and to



undertake to be an example to the women of that nation of what Christian virgins ought to be. The whole community united in prayer to beg the guidance of God in so weighty a matter, and while Walburga was praying she felt so strongly that the call came from God, that she could not entertain the slightest hesitation as to her decision in the event of her Abbess giving the necessary permission ; and when the preparations had been made and all were ready, no one set out with a more willing heart than Walburga, who was then thirty-eight years old.

At first, wind and weather were favourable, and the voyage went well, but before long a violent storm arose, which placed the vessel in imminent danger. The sailors recklessly threw all the cargo overboard, and thus all the comforts provided by loving hands for the poor nuns were lost to them and made instead the food of fishes. But anything was better than a watery grave ! The crew was thoroughly terrified, and the nuns very naturally shared the general alarm. Walburga alone remained unmoved. Seeing this, her sisters besought her to pray for their safety, and at their instance she knelt on the deck with arms outstretched, imploring God to hear her prayer ; then rising, she commanded the wind and waves, and there came a great calm, so that all who saw it marvelled. The nuns landed safely at Antwerp, and the sailors spread abroad the story of the miracle at sea. The consequence was that Walburga was looked upon as a wonder, and both she and her companions were most hospitably received by the townsfolk.

In the Gallican Martyrology there is an anniversary commemoration of St. Walburga on May 2nd. "She is," says an old writer, "greatly venerated in that city"

(Antwerp) "on account of a tradition stating that this holy virgin on her way from England to Germany made some stay in Antwerp: and there is seen in the most ancient church in that city a certain grotto in which she was wont to pray, for which reason the church was dignified by our ancestors with the title of Walburga. And indeed," he continues, "the same church, before receiving the Roman office, was accustomed to celebrate the feast of their peculiar patroness St. Walburga four times a year."

The stay of the nuns at Antwerp was probably rendered inevitable by the loss of all their earthly goods in the sea. Doubtless they were obliged to live on the hospitality and charitable alms of the faithful until they could procure fresh supplies from Wimbourne. However, they at length reached Mayence safely, after a long and perilous journey through desolate lands filled with dense forests and treacherous swamps, and there found St. Boniface and St. Willibald awaiting them. We can picture the joy of that meeting and the deep thankfulness which filled their hearts at the thought of a great difficulty surmounted, and at the prospect of the apostolate and harvest in store for them.

Walburga was first sent to a convent in Thuringia to await the completion of the convent at Heidenheim, over which she was to rule under the guidance of her brother Winebald, who had already settled near there with his monks, and was busily engaged in the erection of the monastery, and the evangelization of what had hitherto justly been called Heidenheim (the home of the heathen), but whose name was soon to become meaningless. In 752 the convent was sufficiently advanced for occupation, and Winebald came to Thuringia to fetch his sister and those nuns who were to help her in the first diffi-

culties of the new foundation. Thus once more God's providence united the brother and sister, and for ten years Walburga was to enjoy the help of his strong and experienced direction. Hitherto she had lived in subjection and dependence, and had it not been for Winebald the weight of government might have proved too heavy a burden. Yet God, in His goodness, left her a support in her brother until she had gained such experience that she was able to stand alone; then, gently and tenderly, He removed the human prop, and in His strength she was able to continue her journey unaided. As to her character as Abbess, we cannot do better than quote the words of the Breviary regarding her: "She was set over the recently-built monastery of Heidenheim, where she practised such sublime virtues that all saw in her what they could deservedly admire and advantageously imitate. She joined the greatest sweetness and prudence of manner to the other gifts of nature and of grace with which she was endowed. Her advice was never at fault; she helped all by her charity; and seeking day by day for better and more perfect gifts, she urged forward, both by word and example, those virgins who were subject to her. She never indulged in any pleasure; she macerated her innocent body by severe fasting; she joined night to day by her continual prayer, being ever intent on the contemplation of Divine things. Thus, not distracted among the cares of government, she fulfilled her ministry with sincere devotion in God's sight. She made herself the true example of maternal and fraternal virtues, excelling as she did in all the acquirements of a prudent virgin."

Under Winebald's direction the monks had gradually converted the waste land around the abbey into fertile

to swerve a hair's-breadth from the Rule, or from the wise ordinances of her holy brother. It was with a view to keep his memory fresh among them that she undertook to write his life in Latin, together with an account of St. Willibald's pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Two miracles which happened towards the end of Walburga's life are related by Wolfhard, a monk who wrote her biography about a century after her death. It seems to have been the custom for the sacristan to provide lights for the church and cloister when it grew dark. One night, however, something had annoyed him, and being in a very bad temper, he determined to make himself as disagreeable as possible. Walburga, who had remained in the church after Vespers and had prolonged her prayer until late, found on leaving the church that the cloister was quite dark. Going to the sacristy, she told the sacristan to get a light, but he refused, speaking with great insolence to the Abbess. Her usual sweetness was undisturbed by this churlish behaviour, and, leaving him to recover himself, she groped her way as best she could to her cell, going supperless to bed. But our Lord, who is not wont to be outdone in generosity, vouchsafed on this occasion visibly to reward the patience and humility of His servant, for all on a sudden, to the great astonishment of the nuns, the whole monastery was illuminated by a brilliant light, the like of which they had never before witnessed. They had already retired to rest, but roused by the dazzling light, they hastily rose, and, half frightened, half wondering, they sought to discover whence it proceeded. Looking out of the windows, they saw that it came from the Abbess's cell, and hurrying to their mother, they sought from her the explanation of the mystery. As they

questioned her, she burst into tears and exclaimed: "To Thee, O God, whom I have served from my childhood, do I give thanks for this grace. Thou hast vouchsafed to comfort with this heavenly light me Thine unworthy servant, and to dispel the darkness of the night with the rays of Thy mercy, in order to encourage these my daughters to remain faithful to me, and this favour has been done to me, not on account of my merits, but in answer to the prayers of my devoted and holy brother, who now reigns with Thee in glory."

On another occasion, when the nuns had gone to the dormitory, Walburga still remained at her prayers. As she prayed she felt impelled by a secret impulse to leave the church and go she knew not whither. She walked blindly on for a considerable distance, until she stood at length at the door of an old castle which belonged to a neighbouring baron. He was a huntsman, and had a number of boar-hounds that at night were unchained to serve as watch-dogs. These savage beasts gathered round the gentle nun as she stood on the threshold, barking and whelping, but not one of them touched her. The baron came hurriedly to the door at the sound of the barking, and seeing her alone, was amazed because his dogs did not try to harm her; he told her that she was in great danger, and asked her how she came there. But she seemed unmoved, and told him not to fear, for she knew the dogs would not touch her, since God Himself had brought her there, and would take her safely back whither she had come. She then told him her name, and that she had come by Divine inspiration to bring health and consolation to his house in the hour of trial, if he would believe with his whole heart that God alone is the true Physician who has power over life and death. At these words the baron threw open the

meadows, which now began to yield ample crops ; but Winebald and Walburga looked upon themselves merely as God's stewards, and their delight was to bestow everything available upon the poor and needy. Heidenheim soon became famous for its hospitality ; while the monks ministered to the men, Walburga and her nuns opened their doors and their hearts to the poor half-civilized women whose souls were even more destitute than their bodies. Walburga would herself wait upon her guests, washing their feet and dressing their sores with her own hands ; teaching them, in short, by an example more forcible than words, the lessons they so much needed of meekness, charity, and humility. Ozanam has aptly described the influence of those high-born English ladies. "The humble work of the nuns hid itself in its silent extension, yet history points out its place in the first development of German civilization ; and is it not the will of God that women should be found by the side of every cradle ?"

In 761 the death of Winebald made Walburga's sacrifice complete. He had, as we have seen, never been strong, and one illness after another had left him crippled and infirm, so that he could with difficulty get about ; yet, feeling his end approach, nothing would satisfy him but to set out on a farewell pilgrimage to the tomb of his beloved master and uncle, St. Boniface, at Fulda. The effort was more than he could bear, and he fell dangerously ill. However, he rallied enough to return with the greatest difficulty to Heidenheim. As his weakness increased and he could not leave his room, he would say Mass at an altar which he had caused to be erected, and no illness could induce him to shorten his long vigils or omit his fasts. Three days before his death

he warned his brethren of its approach, and his brother, the bishop, and St. Walburga were both with him at the last. "Thus," says an old writer, "after many years spent between the exercises of Martha and Mary, sometimes attending in the solitude of his monastery to prayer and contemplation, as likewise to the establishment of regular observance, and sometimes travelling about to win souls to Christ, he, perceiving his last hour to approach, after many pious exhortations made to all that were present, quietly yielded up his soul to God on December 18, 761."

Winebald's body was clothed in his priestly vestments, after which he was laid in a stone coffin and buried in the church which he had himself built. St. Willibald performed the last rites of the Church for his departed brother, and then remained some little time at Heidenheim to make the necessary arrangements for the future government of the monastery, now left without a head. The monks, who had long had occasion to note St. Walburga's virtue and prudence, and knew how she was impregnated with her brother's spirit, felt that no one could better carry on the work that he had begun. They had a precedent for maternal government in some of the great English monasteries—Wimbourne in particular, where Walburga had been trained; and when the matter was laid before the bishop he felt the justice of the petition. Yet it was not without extreme reluctance and in obedience to an express command that Walburga undertook the government of the monks as well as of the nuns. Nevertheless, as had been foreseen, she, in spite of her natural meekness and retiring spirit, knew well how to keep intact monastic observance in the monasteries beneath her rule, and during her lifetime she would never allow her subjects

door, and, with every expression of respect, invited her to enter, acknowledging that he was unworthy to receive so illustrious a lady and so great a servant of God into his house. He marvelled at God's goodness in bringing her to comfort them in the hour of need, for in truth his only daughter lay at that moment at the point of death. He led Walburga to the sick-room, where she found the girl gasping for breath and apparently already in her agony. The mother was bending over her, sobbing in her anguish, while at the sad sight the poor father could not restrain his grief. Then Walburga asked to spend the night in prayer beside her, telling the parents to put their trust in God, who killeth and yet maketh to live, who striketh and yet can heal, and who would surely in their case also show mercy and hear their prayer. All through the night Walburga knelt by the bed, wrestling in prayer for the life of the dying girl, and before the morning dawned the victory was won: her prayer had prevailed and the child was saved. The parents, in ecstasy of joy and thankfulness, broke forth into praises of God, and, trembling with emotion, cast themselves at Walburga's feet, asking how they could show their gratitude, offering her rich presents, lands or money, or anything she would like to name; but she sweetly refused any reward, telling them that she was but an instrument in God's hands, and that having fulfilled her task she would now return as she had come, alone and on foot.

This miracle was not without its effect upon the Saint herself; it made her realize more deeply her nearness to God, and caused her to see more clearly her great obligations to Him, for to whom much is given, of him much shall be expected. "From that day forward," says her biographer, "she devoted herself to a yet stricter manner of life, and strove ever more



fervently after perfection." Not long before her death a great consolation was afforded her by the translation of St. Winebald's relics to a more suitable shrine. The fame of his holiness had extended itself far beyond the neighbourhood of Heidenheim, and God had rewarded the piety of the many pilgrims to his tomb by miraculous favours and cures. These miracles having been carefully investigated, St. Willibald, who had been rebuilding the monastic church on a large scale, determined to prepare also a special chapel to receive the relics of his brother, who was really its founder.

In 776, on September 23rd, when the chapel was complete, Willibald came to preside over the solemn translation, at which a great concourse of people was present. The monks exhumed the coffin and placed it on the bier prepared for it, upon which the Bishop, before the whole assembly, lifted the lid, and, O joy and wonder! the holy Abbot looked as fresh and beautiful as if he had but now fallen asleep; fifteen years in the damp earth had left no trace of decay, they only served to enhance the miracle. All were eager to gaze on so wondrous a spectacle, and in order to satisfy their piety, Willibald allowed each in turn to approach and venerate the relics. The first to kiss the holy body was Walburga, and who shall describe the emotion of the sister as she gazed on the well-known features of the brother she had loved so well!

For the short time which remained to her on earth her life was rather angelic than human. She was frequently found in ecstasy, kneeling absorbed in prayer at her oratory. "At length," says her biographer, "being confirmed in God's holy love, having overcome the world and all its attractions, filled with faith, impregnated with charity, adorned with wisdom and the

jewel of chastity, conspicuous for her benevolence and humility, she went to receive the reward which was to crown so many virtues." As the summons sounded in her heart, inviting her to the marriage feast of the Lamb, she left this valley of tears with unmingled joy, for even while she had lived on earth her heart had always dwelt in heaven; and as a bride adorned with her jewels, clothed in her wedding-garment, she went forth to meet her celestial bridegroom.

She was no sooner dead than God glorified His holy servant, surrounding her body with a halo of light which made it appear as though already endued with immortality, while from it exhaled so sweet a perfume that it filled the whole church and monastery, bearing testimony to the spotless virginity and purity of her immaculate body, in which sin had not sown the germ of decay. St. Willibald, who had been privileged to assist Walburga in her last moments and to administer the Holy Sacraments to her, had now the last consolation of laying her to rest beside her brother Winebald. Willibald himself survived for some years, robust and vigorous in health, until he was more than eighty years old; then, feeling that his work was done, he warned his disciples of the near approach of the time of his death. On the very day of his happy departure from this world he was able to say Mass and give Holy Communion to his flock. Then he died, and was buried with the honour his great work as an apostle and a bishop deserved, in his cathedral church at Eichstadt, July 7, 781.

After his death, devotion to St. Walburga gradually diminished, and her tomb was neglected. However, about the year 870, Otkar, the sixth bishop of Eichstadt, determined to restore the church and monastery of

Heidenheim, which were both in a very dilapidated state. The workmen to whom the work was entrusted did not know much about St. Walburga, and treated her tomb with scant reverence, making a path over it for convenience. One night, when the good bishop was asleep, he was aroused from his slumber to find the Saint standing beside his bed, reproaching him for his neglect in suffering her relics to be thus desecrated and trodden underfoot by every passer-by; and she warned him, as a proof that the vision was no idle dream, that a sign should be given him on the morrow. A sign was indeed given him, as the Saint had foretold, for during the course of the day news was brought to him that the north wall of the newly-erected church of Heidenheim had fallen in during the night. Otkar was much impressed by this event, and he resolved that the Saint should never again have cause to reproach him. He therefore set out for Heidenheim with a great number of priests and people, and with all possible honour exhumed the body of the Saint, which was found to be not only incorrupt, but covered with a wonderful moisture like the purest oil. The holy body was brought to the Cathedral at Eichstadt and laid in a temporary resting-place. In 893, Bishop Erchanbold, Otkar's successor, placed the relics under the high altar of the church which he dedicated to her. On raising the body the same remarkable phenomenon was noticed, and her biographer, who was present at the time, tells us that no dust or dirt could soil the manna or oil that distilled from the corpse.

The oil has continued at stated times to flow from her tomb drop by drop into a silver shell placed to receive it. The times when it generally oozes out are from October 12th, the feast of her translation, till

February 15th, her feast day; also when Holy Mass is said over her relics. The oil is collected into bottles and sent to all parts of the world, and has worked miracles without number even in our own days, as the beautiful church of St. Walburga testifies, which was built at Preston, in Lancashire, in thanksgiving for a great favour obtained through her. One remarkable feature of the miraculous liquid is that if treated with disrespect it nearly always evaporates, and once when Eichstadt was under an interdict the oil ceased to flow. Again, if the receiving vessel is removed, the oil is never known to drop on to the ground, but it hangs in clusters until the vessel is replaced. Other saints, for instance St. Nicholas of Myra, have enjoyed a similar privilege, given to them, it would seem, as a reward for their charity and compassion towards their fellow-men. Certain it is that if St. Walburga was full of pity in life for every form of human suffering, the cures which she still works amply prove that in heaven she is not less mindful of the miseries of this our life and pilgrimage. And while the oil from her holy body continues to bring its healing power to the suffering members of many a shattered frame, may we not also believe that the oil of heavenly grace flows still more plentifully at her intercession to soften the hearts which have been hardened by the cold blast of heresy both in England and Germany?

“God hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness.”

(Psalm xliv. 8.)

# SAINT EDITHA OF WILTON

(961-984)

“Lord, who shall dwell in Thy tabernacle? and who shall rest in Thy holy hill? He that walketh without blemish.”—Ps. xiv.

THE motives which induce persons to embrace religious life are perhaps as varied as their vocations. Yet briefly they may be reduced to the following heads. (1) There are those who have sinned deeply and, having been converted to God, feel the need of devoting the remainder of their lives to penance and atonement. (2) Then there are those who dread the temptations to which a secular state would expose them, and wish by leaving the world to ensure as far as possible their eternal salvation. (3) Others again, having probed the hollowness of the world, long to find in a holier atmosphere a happiness which shall endure, a beauty which shall never fade, love which shall not disappoint, truth without alloy. (4) Finally, there are those whose love for God makes them long to give Him all they have and are, to make reparation to His outraged Majesty for the neglect and coldness of their fellow-men, to be victims of His love: in short, to attain to the highest degree of union with Him compatible with their exile. In the

monastic state examples of all these classes may be found, it has its penitents as well as its innocents ; yet, taken as a whole, the Benedictine spirit is rather one of innocence than of penance, and by far the greater number of its saints are those who, like St. Editha, have rather never known the world than left it. They have not turned to God when all else failed them, but they have offered themselves to Him from the very outset, and embraced religious life at an age when hopes are highest and the world seems brightest. They have given to God their first freshness, the bloom of their youth, not a faded offering dried up and withered. Many, it is true, were called upon afterwards to mix with the world, to combat vice and to defend the Church against her foes ; but we do not find a Hildebrand the less fitted for the struggle because he has borne the yoke of monasticism from his childhood. Yet the majority, both of monks and nuns, lived and died unsullied, like the subject of the present sketch, within the walls of their monastery. These are, so to speak, the spring flowers of God's garden ; and those who live in an atmosphere impregnated with worldliness and sin would do well at times to refresh and revive their drooping souls by imbibing the pure air and life-giving fragrance which distils itself from the history of those whose lives were innocent, and who saw God because they were clean of heart.

St. Editha was born in 961. Her father, King Edgar, was a great-grandson of King Alfred the Great, and a son of Edmund, one of Alfred's three grandsons, who succeeded his brother Athelstan. Editha was called after her aunt, the Abbess of Tamworth, who had died

in the odour of sanctity. The Princess Editha of Tamworth had been betrothed to Sightric the Danish king of Northumbria, upon the occasion of his making peace and claiming the friendship of her brother Athelstan. The engagement was based merely on motives of policy, and it is therefore not surprising to find that the Dane proved faithless. Editha, rejoicing to be free from a tie which she had never courted, hastened to ally herself with a Bridegroom who could never fail her. She took the veil in the Abbey of Polesworth, and not long afterwards the news reached her of Sightric's miserable end. In course of time she was judged worthy to undertake a new foundation at Tamworth, the home of her childhood. She died in 925, after a life devoted to prayer, good works, and penance, and her tomb was much resorted to on account of the miraculous favours there obtained. King Edgar caused a church to be erected in her honour, directly her canonization made it possible to do so, and dedicated his little daughter to her, calling her by the same sweet name.

Editha of Tamworth had a sister named Edburga, whom her father, Edward the Elder, had offered to God from her very infancy in a monastery at Winchester, where, says William of Malmesbury, "she gained the affection of all by her obsequious diligence, and was in due time clothed with the habit of a religious virgin. The sublimity of her birth did not at all exalt her mind, for she esteemed it a most generous and noble thing to become vile in the service of Christ. Her sanctity increased with her years and her humility grew with her stature, so that it was her usual practice by night to steal away her religious sisters' stockings, which, after she had

washed and perfumed, she would again set down by their beds. Now, though Almighty God did in her life-time honour her with many miracles, yet, omitting them, I would rather choose to set down this example to show that all her actions were begun by charity and consummated by humility."

The intercession of Edgar's two holy aunts may perhaps have recalled their erring nephew to a sense of the wickedness of his life, for, previous to St. Editha's birth, he had been anything but a good man. Yet his former vices only served to throw his subsequent virtues into a brighter light, while the story of his repentance forms one of the brightest pages in our Saxon annals.

It runs as follows: "When the knowledge of the king's excesses reached St. Dunstan he was deeply moved with grief. Whereupon without any delay he went to the king, who, according to his custom, reverently met him, and when he would have taken him by the hand to lead him to his seat, St. Dunstan with a troubled, severe countenance drew back his hand and would not permit him to touch it. Hereat the king was astonished and asked him why he refused him his hand. To which the bishop answered, 'Sir, I do not give into your sinful hands this hand which has immolated to the eternal Father the Son of a Virgin. First cleanse your hands by penance, and then you may reverently embrace a Prelate's hand which is to reconcile you to the favour of God.' These words did so terrify the king that he presently fell prostrate at the bishop's feet, and with words interrupted with many deep sighs acknowledged his sins. St. Dunstan, seeing so great an example of humility in the king, immediately embraced him and raised him up with a mild, cheerful look, discoursing



with him familiarly of matters touching the good of his soul and imposed upon him a seven years' penance. He therefore having obtained pontifical absolution, applied himself with a zealous diligence to perform his enjoined penance, and moreover, by the counsel of his spiritual father, added superabundantly many other good works of piety thereby to pacify the wrath of God. St. Dunstan forbade the king for all that long space of seven years to wear the crown of his kingdom; he commanded him every week to fast two days, to dispense his treasure liberally to the poor, and moreover to found a monastery for devout virgins to praise God. He enjoined him likewise to expel out of their churches such clergymen as lived scandalous lives and to introduce congregations of religious monks; to enact just and wholesome laws agreeable to God, and to take care that they were observed by the people." How well the king carried out his severe penance, we shall see in the course of the narrative.

Soon after St. Editha's birth her mother retired into a monastery at Wilton<sup>1</sup> despite the entreaties of Edgar, who was sincerely devoted to her and was really desirous, now that his first wife was dead, of sharing his crown and his throne with her. It is evident that she had been rather sinned against than willingly consented to evil, in testimony of which we have the lessons from the monastic breviary, which may be thus freely translated. "By the intervention of St. Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester, or rather, urged on by that love for Christ which is strong as death, the venerable Queen Wilfritha,

<sup>1</sup> Near Salisbury, now the seat of the Earls of Pembroke.

mother to St. Editha, withdrew herself from the kingdom and bride-chamber of this world and retired into a monastery at Wilton, in honour of the Mother of God. Instead of fine purple, interwoven with gold, she clothed herself in a black tunic, and in place of the royal diadem she wore a dark veil; and having taken upon herself the religious habit she made such progress in the paths of perfection, that she was looked upon as a teacher of holiness and placed at the head of the monastery. Here her daughter Editha was guided by divine providence like a branch of frankincense, and a beautiful olive growing out of so holy a root. Here also came the most Christian king Edgar, with a great crowd of princes and nobles and a vast gathering of people as though coming to the court of Christ and to assist at divine nuptials. The city rejoiced at the coming of the king, welcoming him as the father of his country and the prince of peace. Edgar had come to offer a gift at the nuptials, to present his first fruits. In obedience to an inspiration of the most High, Edgar caused a splendid carpet to be laid on the steps of the high altar of our Lady, as it were before the throne and at the feet of the Divine Majesty. On this carpet he placed all the different tokens of worldly honour, beautiful diadems, golden bracelets, rings, jewels and brilliant ornaments of every description, which he offered to Editha. Meanwhile her mother showed to her a nun's black veil, a Psalter, a chalice, and a paten. All prayed together that God, who knoweth all things, might deign to show to one still at such a wayward age what life she should choose for herself. But the holy virgin Editha, in the midst of all that brilliant array, chose the veil and tokens of sanctity and left all the rest

untouched for the maidens of the world. Then the king, with his consort now become his sister, betrothed the little Editha to the Child Christ Jesus, in the presence of angels and men and congratulated themselves on thus becoming allied to the Lord of heaven and earth. Gathered thus early into the very bosom of the Church and into that virginal band, Editha passed her life in such charity, goodness, and cheerfulness, that she deservedly seemed to be none other than that paradise of delights and that perfume of a fruitful field which God had blessed."

Wilfritha trained her little daughter with the utmost care, fostering the natural piety and gravity of her character. Editha readily responded to the teaching of her mother; she was studious and painstaking, and nothing pleased her better than to read the lives and writings of the saints and holy fathers. Among her many virtues, she especially endeared herself to the nuns by her sweet humility in rendering them every lowly service. Yet, desirous as the child was of consecrating herself for ever to the Spouse to whom she had been betrothed, her mother thought it well that she should be brought up with a view to the possibility of having to take her place in the world as the king's daughter, in the event of it not proving to be the will of God that she should remain in the monastery. She therefore caused other children of high rank to associate with her as her playfellows, and made her dress according to the luxurious fashion of the day instead of in the habit of a religious. To all this Editha submitted, waiting patiently for the time when she might lay aside once for all her worldly garments and put on the poor clothing of a nun. In the meantime she knew how to carry a detached and humble heart beneath her royal robes, and to macerate

her innocent and tender body with practices of penance and a rough haircloth, which, even as a child, she constantly wore. Once when the holy bishop Ethelwold came to visit the monastery, Editha was decked out in her best for the occasion, and the good bishop was somewhat astonished to see such gorgeous apparel among the sombre habits of the nuns. Calling Editha to him, he said, "O daughter, these are not such garments as our Lord takes delight in." But she, knowing that love of display held no place in her heart, meekly replied, "Believe me, my father, as poor and humble a mind may, through God's grace, dwell under these garments as under the roughest goatskins; God looks to the heart and not to the exterior."

Not far from the monastery was a large hospice where wayfarers were entertained and the sick nursed and cared for. Editha was sent daily to this hospice by her mother to cheer and comfort the sick, to minister to their wants, and even to dress their sores. She would wait on the poor beggars, giving them food and alms with those sweet words which are above the best gift. On one occasion, as she was standing distributing alms to the poor, a child came to her, destitute in appearance, yet with so fair a face that Editha's heart went out to him at once. On giving him succour she laid her hand in blessing on his head, and as she did so the child vanished, leaving only the happy conviction in her heart that while she always served Christ in the person of His little ones, on that occasion He had sent her His approval by an angel in disguise. We read that her predilection was for lepers, seeing in them a more perfect image of her Spouse, who for our sakes willed to be esteemed a leper and the outcast of men. In her lessons we are told that

“she preferred lepers to the royal children, and the more vile and deformed any one appeared the more eager she would be in serving him.” Truly one scarcely knows which to admire most, the mother or the child. The faith of the mother in letting her only daughter risk the contagion of that most terrible and repulsive of all maladies, or the charity of the child in her eagerness to relieve suffering, even at the cost of what must naturally have been most revolting to her delicate nature.

In 974 Editha lost her grandmother, Elfgiva, who died at the monastery of Shaftesbury, which she had herself built. After the death of her husband, Edmund, who was murdered in 946 by Seof the outlaw, she entrusted her two sons, Edwy and Edgar, to the care of their aunt, and retired to Shaftesbury, where she spent the remainder of her life in continual mourning. William of Shaftesbury says of her that “she was a woman always given to good works, and full of piety and mildness, insomuch that she would often redeem from death condemned malefactors. Costly garments, which to some women are an enticement to vanity, furnished her charities, for she would oft bestow them on the poor. Envy itself could not discommend the lovely features of her body, nor the curious works of her hands. God likewise bestowed on her the grace of prophecy. Both in her life and after her death she wrought many miracles. Having for several years suffered painful infirmities, at last she yielded up her soul, purified in the furnace of afflictions.”

In the same year, 974, King Edgar, having most faithfully performed his penance, was permitted to assume his crown for it was the custom in those days

for kings to wear their crowns on the three great solemnities of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, on which occasions all the great nobles of the realm met at the Court to treat of affairs of State and feast with the king. The coronation was attended with all possible display, destined to impress the king's vassals. He styled himself now King of all England, and not long afterwards he caused eight petty kings to row him down the river Dee, he himself directing at the stern. He earned for himself the title of "The Peaceful," for during the sixteen years of his reign he never had occasion to unsheath the sword against a foreign or domestic foe. This constant peace enabled him the more effectually to carry out the reforms so sadly needed among the clergy, and which had been imposed upon him by St. Dunstan as part of his penance. He was ably seconded in his endeavours, not only by St. Dunstan, but also by St. Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester, and St. Oswald, bishop of Worcester. A quaint old story regarding the former will illustrate the state of the clergy at that time. The holy bishop, on arriving at Winchester, was pained and troubled to see the extremely worldly, not to say evil, lives led by the canons of his cathedral. Again and again he exhorted them to mend their ways and to live up to their obligations, but in vain. They seem to have been easy-going sort of men, and took his entreaties in good part, but the burden of their answer was always the same: "Cras, cras, to-morrow, to-morrow! we can't oblige you to-day." At last, one Sunday, after the Introit of the Mass, which happened to be "Servite Domino in timore," he harangued the offenders and asked them if they understood the meaning of the words which they had just sung, and as they answered "Yes,"

he replied, "Well then, I will no longer give credit to your ravens' voices crying 'Cras, cras!' submit yourselves now once for all to regular discipline, or leave your benefices and quit your dwellings." The result was that the best of them reformed their manners and stayed, while the incorrigible resigned, and their places were taken by monks from Abingdon.

Unfortunately, with a few glorious exceptions, the monasteries were not less in need of reform than the canonries. Thus we read that at St. Albans the Abbot, who was of royal stock, so far forgot the sanctity and gravity of his office as to use garments of silk with gorgeous embroidery, changing not only the colour but the shape of the monastic habit, and using his time in hunting, unmindful of his duties towards his spiritual children. To remedy this state of things St. Dunstan drew up a collection of rules called "A Religious Concord." These regulations had been most carefully collected from those monasteries, whether in England or abroad, in which the Rule of St. Benedict was most carefully observed, especially from Fleury. This "Concord" was sent by King Edgar to every Abbot and Abbess in his kingdom, commanding them, by a decree which accompanied it, to follow most exactly the rules therein contained, that thereby religious discipline and fraternal union might again revive and flourish.

Besides these most necessary reforms, Edgar, with the advice of the bishops, published several most excellent laws relating to ecclesiastical matters, one of which seems to have inaugurated our English half-holiday on Saturday; for he decreed that the Lord's day was to be observed from three o'clock on the afternoon of Saturday till daybreak on Monday.

Very shortly before the death of this great monarch he went to Wilton to assist at the profession of his daughter in the year 975. Editha was then considered old enough to make her final choice as to her future state ; and as she continued firm in her holy purpose of dedicating herself to God in a monastic state, she was allowed to make her profession of the Rule she had already so faithfully practised, and to ratify by vow the offering she had made of herself to God when little more than a babe. Her vows were scarcely pronounced when she had occasion to show how deeply they had taken root in her heart. Her father, justly proud of the virtues which she evinced and the evident prudence and maturity of her character, was bent on making her Abbess over the three convents he had founded in expiation of his sins. The customs of the times did not make the proposal such an abnormal one as we should now consider it, and there is no doubt that if Editha had had the slightest ambition for such an honour very few would have disputed her right. As it was, she utterly rejected the offer, pleading her youth and inexperience, and telling her father that her only design was to remain in obedience and humble subjection. However, as he would not be entirely put off, the nuns of Wilton, in order to pacify him, bestowed on Editha the honorary title of Abbess, but the holy virgin, nothing elated by their choice, remained as before, sitting like Mary at our Lord's feet, yet "withal serving her sisters in the most menial offices like a very Martha."

A very short time after Editha's profession she had the grief of losing her excellent father, who went, we may believe, to swell that glorious band of penitents who



shall endure for ever in the City of God as monuments of His infinite mercy and the plenitude of Christ's Redemption. Lingard quotes an interesting eulogium from the Saxon Chronicles regarding his death. "Here ended the earthly joys of Edgar, England's king ; he chose the light of another world, beauteous and happy. He was known afar among many nations : kings beyond the baths of the sea-fowl worshipped him far and wide ; they bowed to the king as one of their own kin. There was no fleet so proud, there was no host so strong as to seek food in England while the noble king ruled the kingdom. He reared up God's honour : he loved God's law ; he preserved the people's peace the best of all the kings that were before in the memory of man. And God was his helper, and kings and earls bowed to him and they obeyed his will, and without battle he ruled as he willed."

Edgar left two sons, Edward, who was thirteen and succeeded to his throne, and Ethelred, his half-brother, who was but seven. Editha and her brother were very much of an age and both were animated by the same sentiments of piety and virtue which naturally drew them much together. In the Breviary we find the following description of Edward : "When Edward was raised to the throne he was directed by the Lord, the King of kings, in the way of all justice and truth. Relying on His help, he excelled in great power of intellect coupled with the deepest humility, so that by the daily increase of his virtues he elevated his newly acquired dignity to the very acme of its original integrity. He always deferred his youth and inexperience to the advice of Archbishop Dunstan, seeking in all things to follow his counsel and to exercise justice according to his judgement and that of other holy and wise men."

One night the nuns of Wilton were disturbed in their slumbers by the sound of Editha sighing and weeping. The next morning they asked her what had caused her such unwonted grief; to which she answered, "Alas, woe is me! I dreamt that I had lost my right eye, and I understood this to signify that my brother Edward had met with a fatal accident and been deprived by his enemies of his kingdom and his life." The event proved only too well the truth of her forebodings. Edward's stepmother had conceived a violent dislike to him, despite all his endeavours to win her favour and the deference and respect he always showed her. His very virtues were a continual reproach to her, while his growing popularity was daily minimizing any prospect of putting her own son on the throne in his stead. But let us transcribe the remainder of the story from the old chronicle. "There was at that time among the English great tranquillity and abundance of all things. They were replenished with joy to see their king addicted to virtue and piety, affable to all, beautiful in his features, and, considering his tender years, sage and provident in his counsels. In the meantime, that old serpent, swelling with rage and tormented with envy, endeavoured with all his power to disturb the general contentment. Therefore he darted into the heart of Queen Elfrida a great portion of his rage and envy to see this young prince preferred before her son Ethelred; whereupon she spent nights and days in contriving ways how to destroy him, and with her joined several of the discontented nobility. King Edward had now passed three years and a half of his reign, when he was desirous to recreate himself with hunting in a forest to which the town of Wareham is adjoined. Where, having wearied

himself with that exercise and being separated from his company, he diverted to his stepmother's house named Corfe. She, hearing of it, went out to meet him attended with her servants, and seemed to take great joy at his arrival. But he, refusing to enter the house, said that he only desired to see his younger brother. Whereupon she, thinking this a favourable opportunity to execute her abominable designs, commanded drink to be brought out for him. And he, suspecting no harm, accepted it; but as he lifted the cup to his mouth, one of the Queen's servants, having first saluted him humbly, suddenly with his sword rushed upon him and pierced him through, of which wound he presently fell dead. When his stepmother knew that he was dead, she commanded his body to be carried into a lodging near, in which there lived a woman who had been blind from her birth. She, lodging there alone that night, by the holy martyr's merits had her sight restored and saw a heavenly light shining through the whole house. This execrable fact was committed on March 18, 978. As soon as day appeared the woman told the Queen what had happened, at which she was grievously affrighted lest the murder should be discovered. To prevent this she commanded the body to be taken away and plunged deep into a marshy ground where none might find it. But such being the pleasure of Almighty God that His martyr should be known to the world, by a pillar of light descending on the place He discovered the sacred body to some of His servants who searched after it; whereupon certain pious men of the adjoining town took it up and carried it to a church dedicated to our Blessed Lady. And in the place where the sacred body had been hidden there broke

forth a spring of most pure water, called the fountain of St. Edward, where miraculous cures are daily worked on sick people."

When at last the murder was discovered the majority of the nobles, justly indignant, declared they would have nothing to do with the son of the murderess. As the only way to avoid acknowledging so odious a ruler they resolved to make the Princess Editha their queen, and a representative body set out for Wilton to offer her their allegiance, with the crown. The arrival of so important a deputation created quite a sensation at Wilton, and perhaps the calmest person in the monastery was the one whom the mission most concerned, though she was but eighteen at the time. Editha listened unmoved to their proposal, and told them that if her brother Edward was dead to the world, so also was she; that to God she had vowed herself, and that to God, while she lived, she would keep her pledge, and that no power on earth should induce her to exchange her cowl for a crown. Her words were so decided, and her resolution so firmly fixed, that the astonished assembly did not attempt to press the matter further, but left the Abbey marvelling at so great wisdom and contempt of honour in one so young. Moreover, Editha prevailed on them to accept the inevitable, and to acknowledge as king one who had had no share in his brother's murder. For three years Edward's body lay at Wareham, after which, as God continued to show by miracles how pleasing the innocent life had been to Him, and how, though deprived of an earthly crown, he had received an imperishable one in heaven, it was determined to translate his relics to the monastery of Shaftesbury, founded by his ancestors, and where many of them lay. St. Editha came with her

mother to assist at the ceremony, which was to be performed with all possible splendour as an act of reparation to the murdered king.<sup>1</sup> When the body of the martyr was exhumed it was as fresh and supple as though the blood still coursed in his veins; no signs of his violent death marred the peaceful beauty of his countenance, so that he seemed to be gently sleeping. At the sight Editha sprang forward and clasped him in her arms, her love and tenderness for her brother finding vent in the repeated kisses she gave him, while tears of joy showed her rapture. What was it she asked him in that close embrace? Was it that he would obtain for her the grace to join him speedily in his heavenly kingdom? May be, for in three short years the brother and sister were reunited in that home where death shall be no more, and the just shall reign for ever and ever.

By far the greatest miracle worked by the saint was the conversion of his murderess. She had tried to present herself at the solemn ceremony, but had been prevented by an invisible power, like that which held back the penitent St. Mary of Egypt on the threshold of the church. This terrible warning made her sensible of how she was repudiated by God, as well as shunned by men. For many years she sought to win her pardon by the practice of the severest penances. She became as hard and relentless to herself as she had formerly been to others, never sleeping except on the hard pavement, chastising her body with every austerity she could invent, and giving every sign of a real conversion and heartfelt compunction. Not so the man who had aided and abetted her in her evil purpose, for he hardened

<sup>1</sup> In the Vatican Library may be seen a letter of Pope Innocent IV. granting leave for the celebration of St. Edward's feast.

himself to every inspiration of grace and repentance, was struck with a horrible disease and died miserably eaten up by worms.

Towards the beginning of August, in the year 984, there was a great concourse of people and great rejoicings at Wilton, on the occasion of the consecration of the new church adjoining the Abbey, dedicated by St. Editha's desire to St. Denis, the patron of France, to whom she had a special devotion. The Archbishop, St. Dunstan, who had ever been her faithful friend, came to perform the ceremony. In the course of his sojourn at the Abbey he had noticed how often Editha would sign her heart with the sign of the Cross, and taking her hand one day he exclaimed in a spirit of prophecy, "My daughter, this thumb deserves never to perish." And even as he had foretold, so did it fall out. On the morning of the dedication the deacon who was assisting the holy prelate noticed that during the Mass, after the Consecration, the bishop began to weep bitterly. The deacon was much disturbed at the sight of such unwonted grief on so joyful a solemnity, and when the Archbishop was unvesting he ventured to question him, saying, "My father, why do you weep so sorely on this festal day?" To which Dunstan replied, "Alas, my son! Editha, the flower of our virgins, the jewel of our land, shall quickly wither. Within six weeks shall this happen, for this wicked world is not worthy of the presence of so heavenly a light." While the church was in course of erection Editha had often told her sisters that she would be buried in it, saying, "Here is my rest, here will I lie, for I have chosen it." But none of them thought for a moment that she was merely awaiting its completion to obtain her desire; she showed no signs of

disease, and they looked to her companionship for many a long year. Only the angels had watched the growth of her wings, the wings of simplicity and purity which, as the *Imitation* says, infallibly carry us to God. Soon after St. Dunstan's vision Editha fell ill with a fever which exhausted her delicate frame, so that on the 16th day of September she succumbed to it, in the twenty-third year of her age, after being comforted by the Sacraments of Holy Church, and assisted in her last moments by her spiritual father, St. Dunstan. The nuns were inconsolable at her loss, and mourned much and long over her premature death. One who was away when she died, on re-entering the cloister heard the sound as of a large choir of voices singing in the church. She knew that the other nuns were not there, for they were busy preparing for the funeral, so, filled with surprise, she hastened to see what it could be, but was stopped on the threshold of the church by an angel, who said to her, "Go no further; the voices which you hear are those of the angels who have come to conduct the soul of Editha to the realms of bliss."

Not long after her death Editha appeared to her mother, who more than all felt and wept for her loss. Her countenance was radiant with joy, and she was clothed in a robe of glory; while she bade her mother weep no more for her, seeing that she had been received by the Heavenly King into eternal joys. She added that she had been accused before God by Satan, but by the assistance of the saints she had triumphed over him, treading him under her feet by the virtue of the Cross of her Saviour Jesus Christ.

The following year the holy virgin came one night to

St. Dunstan as he was asleep, and called him by his name. "Hitherto," she said, "I, who am numbered with the saints above and united for ever to my eternal Spouse, rest on earth in an unworthy grave; now I have come to make known to you that it is God's will that I should be re-entombed for the comfort of many in this land who will come to pay reverence to my bones. And lest you should imagine that you have been a prey to a passing dream, know that when you exhume me you will find my thumb incorrupt, even as you foretold, neither let it trouble you that my eyes, feet and hands have fallen into decay. They have putrified by divine judgement because I sometimes abused them in childish levity." So saying, she vanished. The Archbishop was much impressed by the vision, but he would not at once act upon it, fearing some delusion. However, a few days later a pilgrim arrived from Wilton, who asked to have speech with him. This pilgrim told him that he had been irresistibly drawn to the church of St. Denis, where, being tired after his journey, he had fallen asleep. As he slept he thought he saw St. Denis with St. Editha at his side. They were standing on the altar step, shining with a radiant light. St. Editha then spoke to him, telling him that it was God's will that her relics should be more honourably buried, and that she wished him to go to St. Dunstan to confirm him regarding a similar revelation which she had made to him. St. Denis then repeated the injunction, and the church was once more wrapped in darkness.

St. Dunstan, after this second intimation, no longer hesitated to undertake the translation, which, after the necessary preparations, took place on November 3, 985. All fell out just as the holy virgin



had foretold; her thumb was intact, but her other extremities had gone to dust. On the occasion of the translation there was a great concourse of people, and, as often happens, the piety of a crowd is apt to become ill-judged, so much so, that the saints are obliged to defend themselves from the well-meaning violence of those who would pilfer their relics, tear their garments, and even mutilate their bodies to satisfy their pious greed. Among the pilgrims was a monk named Edulph, from Glastonbury. He actually had the audacity to try to cut off one of the shin bones of the saint for his private devotion. However, as he did so the blood began to flow as copiously as if the corpse had life. Edulph was filled with consternation at the prodigy, and, terrified at the speedy vengeance of the saint, he let the knife fall and began to pray for mercy. The blood then ceased to flow, and Edulph went away a wiser man, and more inclined to be cautious in his dealings with holy relics. One of the nuns had also stolen quietly into the church by night and began cutting away a piece of her garment, when Editha raised her head, as though she were alive, and at the sight of her stern countenance the surreptitious invader remained half dead with fright.

For many long years Edith's tomb continued to be the scene of miracles, which, from their similarity, might weary the reader; but one legend is noteworthy as being unique of its kind. In those days it was not an uncommon practice for clerics who were poor and without any regular special duties to travel about the country collecting alms, and carrying with them in a closed coffer the body of a martyr or confessor. On one occasion some clerics came over from France, bearing the body of St. Junius, and in the course of

their travels tarried at Wilton. Entering the church, they placed the coffer containing the relics on the altar step before the shrine of St. Editha, and then went to beg alms in the neighbourhood. After a successful collection they came to reclaim their treasure, but no human power could lift the coffer; and, cry and lament as they would, it remained as if nailed to the spot. Who could wonder that St. Junius preferred to be at the feet of innocence and purity rather than be carried on the shoulders of sinful men who might use him for a means of earthly gain? At last the Abbess, to rid herself of the travellers, gave them a gift of money to compensate for the loss of the rich reliquary, and they went away contented, while St. Junius remained peacefully at Wilton as St. Editha's honoured guest.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these stories may seem quite incredible, and no doubt much that is only legendary may have got mingled with truth; yet it is impossible to argue from the fact that similar prodigies do not often happen now, that they could not have happened then. We must remember that the Anglo-Saxon Church was at that time only in its infancy, and God was obliged to appeal more to the senses of His children, and to give them from time to time some sensible token which might reach their understanding. Now that the Church has, so to speak, matured after the lapse of so many centuries, God has ceased to instruct men so frequently in this manner; He now rather addresses himself to the intellect, and convinces souls in a less striking but not less effectual way. However, sceptics are not confined to our own days, and perhaps the best

<sup>1</sup> Vide *Vite S. Edithæ, Virg. et Monial.* Ranbeck's *Calendarium Annale Benedictinum*, pars. iii. p. 775.

argument in favour of the miracles of our Saint is the scepticism of King Canute when the stories we have just related were told to him. He happened to be at Salisbury, about the year 1020, and was invited by the good Bishop Ethelnoth to a banquet at Wilton. During dinner, as was but natural, the bishop talked a great deal about the subject always uppermost at Wilton, namely, the wonders wrought by St. Editha. The king, excellent as he was in many respects, was a thorough man of the world, and after listening with an incredulous smile, said at length, "My good father, do not try to make me believe these fables, I am too old and have seen too much of the world to be easily taken in." The Archbishop was rather hurt at the slight offered to his patroness, but wisely held his peace, only secretly praying her to vindicate her own honour. After dinner he proposed showing the king the church, to which the latter readily agreed. When they approached the shrine an extraordinary prodigy happened. Editha suddenly rose from her tomb, her face shining with the fire of holy indignation. The king, speechless with terror, fell fainting to the ground: his servants at length restored him to consciousness, and he began with much reverence and much sorrow to beg pardon of the Saint for the irreverent manner in which he had spoken of her. As a token of the devotion which he now for ever promised to her, he ordered a costly shrine, adorned with jewels, to be prepared for her at his expense, and begged of her henceforth to be his patroness. Soon after he had proof of the Saint's forgiveness and patronage, for, being in imminent danger of shipwreck, he called to her in his anguish to save him from a watery grave, upon which the storm instantly subsided and the king con-

tinued his journey without further mishap. He did not fail to spread abroad the account of his miraculous escape, and when Bishop Aeldred was threatened with a similar danger in the Adriatic, he bethought himself of Editha, and invoked her assistance when all human means had failed and the ship was actually sinking. At this supreme moment the Saint suddenly stood beside him saying: "Be of good heart, I will deliver thee from the tempest." And it fell out even as she had promised.

Like St. Junius, we too have been resting awhile at St. Editha's feet, and we, like him, have recognised in her that innocence which is loved by God and man. Though we cannot, as he did, remain always with her, let us at least carry away with us this lesson which the author of the *Imitation* thus expresses, "God is the lover of purity, He seeks a pure heart and there is the place of His rest."

PRAYER FROM THE MISSAL.

O God, who dost make for Thyself a dwelling in a pure heart, grant that we, who venerate with humble homage the purity of Editha, Thy faithful spouse, may imitate the example of her holy life. Amen.

## SAINT MECHTILDE

(1241--1298)

THE names of Gertrude and Mechtilde have ever been so inseparably linked that it has erroneously been thought that they were sisters. The mistake, however, makes little or no difference to the intimate ties which bound them in the closest bond of friendship for nearly forty years. The sympathy which existed between those two holy souls arose from something far deeper than natural relationship. It sprang from the mutual love which they bore to God, a love so ardent and eager that it left no room in their hearts for any affections which were not for Him and in Him. The wonderful favours which both received, and the intimacy which both were privileged to have with their Divine Spouse, made them speak to each other with great freedom, and understand each other as only saints can. Mechtilde, being the elder of the two, was always looked up to by Gertrude, who speaks of her sanctity with enthusiastic admiration, and often had recourse to her for advice and for the solution of her difficulties regarding the revelations which were made to her.

Some sceptical minds may be inclined to think that the visions and familiar intercourse which existed between Our Lord and these two chosen souls were nothing more than the poetical flights of devout imaginations. They may imagine that because they themselves have never experienced anything of the kind such things can never have taken place. These should recall Our Lord's own prayer

to His heavenly Father: "I confess to Thee, O Father, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them to little ones." It is sin which has raised up a barrier between God and man, for before the Fall, God walked in Paradise and conversed familiarly with Adam and Eve. It is the pride of life which blinds and dulls our supernatural vision, so that we do not see that we are "wretched and miserable, and poor and blind and naked." But in the case of Gertrude and Mechtilde it was not so. They had never known the world and its wickedness; their souls were spotless and unsullied; they had lived in a holy atmosphere from childhood; God was all in all to them, and they could not realize anything except in connection with Him. What wonder, then, if in them was verified, even in this life, the Divine promise, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."

St. Mechtilde was born in 1241. Her father was Count de Hackeborn, head of one of the richest and noblest families of Saxony, so that her surroundings were all calculated to set this world and its attractions in their brightest light. But a love of perishable goods was to find no place in the heart of one whom God had singled out to be His, and His alone, from the first moment of her existence. That He had so chosen her was shown by a remarkable event which occurred at her birth. She was so weakly and fragile that when she was born she seemed on the point of death, and the attendants, in great alarm, hurried her off then and there to the parish priest to have Baptism administered before it was too late. The priest complied with their wish to have the child baptized; but, animated by a prophetic spirit, differed from them as to her danger. "Do not fear," he said; "this child will work great wonders, and she will end her days in a good old age." Afterwards Our Lord revealed to St. Mechtilde that He had caused her Baptism to be thus hastened that He might the more speedily take possession of the temple of her heart, which was destined to be consecrated for ever to Him.

We have only one little incident of Mechtilde's childish years which shows that she had a touch of mischief in her character. It appears that she wanted to have a little fun, so she told the servants that there was a thief in the garden, and gave them all a fright and a hunt for nothing. In after years this little untruth caused her many tears ; and, on her death-bed, it was the only breach of truth she could find with which to reproach herself.

When she was seven years old her mother took her to see her sister Gertrude,<sup>1</sup> who was a professed nun at the Benedictine Monastery of Rodardsdorf. As her mother and sister were talking together, Mechtilde ran off to carry out a little plan she had secretly formed. Going to each of the nuns in turn, she fell at their feet and begged them to allow her to share with them the privilege of being a Spouse of Christ. The nuns, of course, answered that they would be only too glad to welcome her among them if she could obtain her mother's consent, and the little girl determined never again to leave the convent. When her mother wished to return home nothing could induce the child to accompany her ; and at length, not being able to delay any longer, the mother decided to leave her at the Monastery, hoping that it was only a passing whim on the part of her daughter. However, as time went on and Mechtilde showed no sign of wishing to return, both her father and her mother went to Rodardsdorf, and endeavoured by every means in their power to shake her purpose. They had willingly given their eldest daughter to God, but they were not prepared to sacrifice also their second dearly loved child.<sup>2</sup> Yet when they saw the strength of her resolution and the generosity with which she turned her back on home and comforts and everything which could naturally attract, they were constrained to acknowledge the higher power working within

<sup>1</sup> Not St. Gertrude who was Gertrude of Lachenborn.

<sup>2</sup> They had also a third daughter named Luitgarde, who is described as being beloved of God and men, but she died very young, and in after years St. Mechtilde saw her in heaven dressed in white and gold. She probably came between Gertrude and Mechtilde.

her, and to bow their heads in submission to One who had a stronger claim to Mechtilde than even they who had given her birth. So they left her to grow up and blossom in the cloister until such time as the Master should come and gather her into His garner.

Mechtilde was now safe in her convent home, and in one sense she had gained her heart's desire; but many a long year had yet to pass before she could make her profession in the holy Order of St. Benedict, and bind herself by vow to Christ, her heavenly Spouse. In the meantime she wore the little habit of an alumna; she assisted daily at the conventual Mass and the day hours of the Divine Office, while on great feasts she would be allowed to join the community at Matins. The greater portion of her time was, however, devoted to her studies, in which she made rapid progress; for we read that she was remarkably gifted both in mind and body, and that such good use did she make of the talents entrusted to her that she fitted herself to be a most useful member of the Community.

About three years after Mechtilde's arrival at Rodardsdorf the Abbess Cunegonde died, and Mechtilde's elder sister, Gertrude, was elected in her place in 1251. She was but nineteen years of age, yet she bore within her heart the wisdom of old age, and transcended her years by her ways, as is said of her holy patriarch St. Benedict, so that the Community had always reason to congratulate themselves on their choice. Her father, Count de Hackeborn, had died some time before her election, but her two brothers, Counts Albert and Louis, who had inherited his vast estates, were anxious to bestow some mark of esteem and affection upon their sisters. They therefore offered the nuns of Rodardsdorf an estate named Helfta, situated about a mile from Eisleben, on which to build a more suitable Monastery. The Abbess Gertrude gladly accepted their proposal, and in 1258 the community removed to the Abbey, which the sanctity of its inmates was to render so dear to the Heart of God.



Here Mechtilde sealed her consecration by pronouncing her holy vows with all that earnestness which was so characteristic of her. She had prepared for that day long and fervently, yet the time of waiting had seemed but short for the greatness of her love, and for the infinite value of the title to which she had aspired, of being in very truth the spouse of Him whom angels serve. Henceforth she kept her eyes ever fixed on her Beloved, seeking only to remove any obstacle which could hinder the union which death was to perfect.

In 1261 the little child arrived at the monastery of Helfta who was to immortalize its name and win for herself the title of "St. Gertrude the Great"; a title unshared, in the annals of the Church, by any other woman saint. Gertrude seems to have been instinctively attracted by the gentle holiness of Mechtilde, and it is probable that they were much thrown together, as Mechtilde's talents eminently qualified her for the education of others. Her sister had placed her at the head of the school, and she ably seconded the efforts of her Abbess to raise the standard of education, and to ground her pupils thoroughly in sacred and profane knowledge; while she established a higher class for the more advanced study of the Holy Scriptures and the Fathers for those who showed any aptitude for learning.

Mechtilde had a most beautiful voice and remarkable appreciation of the art of music, so that she held all her life the office of Chantress, and spared no pains to train the choir to render as intelligently and as harmoniously as might be the sacred chants of Holy Church. Her zeal for God's service and the perfect performance of the Divine praises was not, perhaps, always shared by those whom she endeavoured to instruct, for we find her on one occasion praying for one of the nuns who found the singing tedious. And Our Lord said to St. Mechtilde: "Why does she sing to Me unwillingly when I will sing to her most sweetly for ever in heaven? Let her know that to sing to Me one day in obedience is more pleasing to Me than all the singing in

the world done by her own will." Mechtilde herself never wearied of singing to her Beloved, so that He called her his "Philomel," because the sweetness of her voice found its melody in the depth of her loving heart. Praise was the keynote of her life, as it is the keynote of her writings, and in this she was animated by a truly Benedictine spirit. In the Rule which she professed, her holy founder, St. Benedict, speaks of praise as the "work of God," and says that his children are so to devote themselves to it that nothing whatever is to be preferred before it. Our Lord once told St. Mechtilde that the highest good and the most *useful* thing a man can do is to praise God and converse with Him in prayer; and that the most perfect thing for the heart to do is to love and desire God and think of Him in meditation.

Love lives by suffering, and the depth of our love for God is gauged by the depth of suffering we are able to endure for His sake. Hence it is that great sanctity always entails extraordinary trials. All are called upon to take up their daily cross and follow Christ, yet, seeing our weakness and the shallowness of our love, He deigns in most cases to bear the greater part of the burden. But when He sees strong, courageous souls whom He can trust to love Him for His own sake and not for what He gives, He makes such souls His cross-bearers, to share His load of the iniquities of all mankind, and to fill up by their sufferings what is wanting in His own. This is the explanation of the life-long martyrdom which sometimes the most innocent souls are called upon to endure: not to expiate their own sins, but those of others, in union with the Passion of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Mechtilde was a striking example of this, for of her we are told that God ever held His scourge over her head, and that she was never free from bodily pain. She was afflicted with disease which does not kill, yet which, humanly speaking, takes all pleasure out of life. Among her other ailments, she suffered from a painful eruption on her head, so that, although as a rule she would accept of

no alleviation which was not according to the common usage, she was obliged to avail herself of a lighter veil than that worn by the other nuns, for the burning fever in her head caused the least weight to be almost intolerable. The terrible headaches to which she was subject are often mentioned in her writings, as it was generally on these occasions that Our Lord came to comfort her by some revelation of His love. He told her once that when she was well He held her in His right arm, but when she was ill He clasped her with His left, so as to bring her nearer to His Sacred Heart. On one occasion she had been more than usually suffering; indeed she had only laid down at night to suffer, as for a whole month no sleep had come to give her any rest. This insomnia, added to the violent headache, inevitably told on her mentally, so that she could not pray or frame a holy thought. Our Divine Lord also appeared to have withdrawn all His favours from her, and this dryness of spirit caused her such exquisite pain that the nuns would hear her sometimes break forth into piteous appeals to her Divine Spouse to have compassion on her and look upon her once more with His wonted love. After a week of this trial He vouchsafed to hear her cry, and inundated her soul with spiritual sweetness, though the physical pain still continued; yet this she counted as nothing compared to the other. However, when a whole month had elapsed without her being able to sleep, and her body was utterly exhausted, she ventured to ask Our Lord to lay His hand upon her head and let her sleep. He graciously did so, and then made her rest peacefully on His breast. After forty days, as she was still suffering from her head, she asked Our Lord to give her His blessing. He blessed her, saying, "Be cured in mind and body." Immediately the pain abated. Then she begged Our Lady and the Saints to join her in thanking God for taking compassion on her weakness. From that time she began to get better, although she never quite recovered, which may partly be accounted for by the fact that no sooner did she feel a little stronger than she would devote herself to her spiritual

exercises with a zeal and energy which far exceeded her bodily strength.

She was all her life subject to such grievous infirmities that her biographer does not hesitate to associate her with the white-robed army of martyrs. We might naturally have supposed that, for one so delicate, corporal austerities were out of the question ; seeing, too, that she had such ample opportunity for patience and mortification in bearing with resignation the sufferings God sent her. This, however, was not the case, for the love which burned in Mechtilde's breast for her Divine Spouse gave a strength to do penance which was almost superhuman. Her constant meditation on the Passion of Christ made her long to make Him some return ; and her eagerness to suffer with Him and for Him sometimes induced her to perform such excessive penances that most of us would rather admire than imitate them. For example, it happened that one Lent she heard some men passing the monastery who were singing detestable songs, and shouting and behaving in a way which was all the more painful in a season set apart so especially for contrition and amendment of life. Mechtilde was cut to the heart at the thought of the offence against God, and touched, too, with compassion for the misguided sinners. Full of zeal, and longing to make some expiation, she filled her bed with broken glass and earthenware, and on this she rolled her innocent body until she was one great wound from head to foot—bathed in blood, and so torn and gashed that, for a long time after, the pain would not allow her either to sit or lie down.

Once when the nuns were taking the discipline, according to their custom, Mechtilde was wrapt in spirit, and heard how the sound of the disciplines reverberated in Heaven, causing the angels to tremble with joy, while on earth the demons who were busy tempting souls also heard and fled in terror ; and thus the souls were freed and sins prevented.

She could never meditate on the Passion of her Saviour without shedding many tears ; and in Holy Week the reality of His sufferings and death became so vivid to her mind

that her compassion made her truly a sharer in His pain. Her face and hands seemed as though she was consumed by a burning fever, and it is said that at times she even sweated drops of blood in her agony. We read in St. Mechtilde's revelations how, in her monastery, there was a touching little ceremony performed on Good Friday evening. The nuns, having assisted in spirit at the death of Jesus Christ, would take the Crucifix and bury it, in remembrance of the burial of Our Lord on the first Good Friday ; and Mechtilde would then pray with great earnestness that He would bury her heart with Him, and unite it inseparably with His.

Those who lived with Mechtilde have left on record her many virtues exercised in an heroic degree. They tell us how she was of a marvellously sweet and gentle disposition ; how she was profoundly humble and patient, a great lover of poverty, and so prompt in obedience as to carry out most perfectly the injunction of her Rule that at the call of obedience the sisters should leave unfinished any occupation they may happen to be engaged in. Her diligence was one of her chief characteristics and the outcome of her love ; so that notwithstanding her bad health and the lassitude which would have made inaction not only excusable, but very permissible, it is said of her in the Office for her Feast that she never let a moment of her time pass in idleness, but always either prayed, read, taught, or worked. Her love of poverty caused her to deprive herself even of what was necessary ; her garments were of the coarsest possible material, and her habit so patched and worn that it was difficult to find the original material.

Several little anecdotes have come down to us which illustrate her forgetfulness of self, and show how deeply she was absorbed in the thought of God. Like St. Bernard, she knew not what it was to look about her, or to be affected by things pleasing or displeasing to the senses, such as food or drink. Sometimes she would eat, unawares, rotten eggs, while her neighbours in the refectory

could hardly endure the smell they emitted. Her superiors sometimes made use of her utter unconsciousness of what she ate to give her meat, as allowed by the Rule to those who are in weak health. If offered to her she would refuse it on the ground that she was not sufficiently ill ; but if set before her in the refectory, she would eat it without being the least aware of what she was doing ; and if the nuns laughed at her afterwards for it, she would testify her surprise, not having noticed the stratagem.

Of her deep humility we need no proof, for without it her many other virtues could not have existed. Yet, hidden as true humility must be, it always betrays itself by its sweet perfume. All through St. Mechtilde's revelations it is particularly striking how she lays stress on her own weakness, unworthiness, and negligence in order to bring out with greater prominence God's exceeding compassion and goodness towards her. In the opening chapter of her *Revelations* we find her thinking over her sins in the bitterness of her heart, and wondering what she should do when she appeared before the Almighty Judge, seeing how negligent she had been. Again, we see her deploring with tears her infidelity to grace, and the little return of love she had made to God for His infinite love towards her. Prostrating herself at His feet, she would accuse herself of having wasted her whole life, and offer in reparation to live on till the day of judgement in the endurance of such pains and sufferings as no creature had ever experienced. After her death, her confessors testified to the extraordinary innocence of her life ; so that one remarked, with great simplicity, that on hearing her general confession, he had found so little matter that he had only imposed on her the "Veni Creator" by way of penance. This makes us wonder what were the sins and infidelities she so often alludes to ; and perhaps some of the chapters in her own revelations give us the best key to the problem.

She describes on one occasion how she thought she stood before the judgement seat of God, and that all the heavenly court came to bear witness against her.

Our Lady accused her of being wanting in fidelity to her most sweet Son, to whom she had given birth in order that He might be a Brother to Mechtilde. The Angels accused her of having cooled the fire of Divine love in her heart by her tepidity. They said that she had not acted up to the great graces which she had received; that by useless thoughts she had troubled the rest the King of Peace had sought for in her heart; that she had not served God with that extreme reverence due to Him; that she had not sufficiently respected the image of God, both in herself and in others; that she had not been as attentive as she ought to the sweet inspirations of grace; and finally, that she had sometimes not availed herself of their (the Angels') ministry, by not sending through their means continuous loving messages to her Beloved. Then came the Saints: the Martyrs complaining that she had only borne her sufferings because she was obliged; the Confessors, that she had gone through her spiritual duties negligently; the Virgins, that she had not loved so lovable a Spouse with all her heart. Here we have a picture of what she thought of herself, and of how she believed that all God's creatures would rise up in judgement against her. Yet such was her confidence in Jesus Christ, and her trust in His infinite merits, that she goes on to describe how, when all the Angels and Saints had borne witness against her, Our Lord Himself came forward to plead her cause, and bade her offer to the Eternal Father His virtues and sufferings in atonement for her sins; so that by this means the just anger of the Almighty Judge was appeased, and all her negligence atoned for.

In another place she gives us a clue to the extreme rigour with which she judged herself, for she tells us how, when she examined her conscience, she looked first into the mirror of God's awful sanctity and then at her own soul. She contemplated the depth of humiliation to which the Son of God had subjected Himself, and can we therefore wonder that in her own humility she still found a flaw? She looked at the poverty of the Man-God who died stripped of

all things, having given away even the last drop of His blood ; and she saw in her heart that she was not yet stripped of every affection which was not for Him. She looked again at the obedience of Him who came not to do His own will, but obeyed His Father even unto death ; and though she could say confidently that since she had sacrificed her will to God on the day of her profession she never had recalled it ; yet she felt that she had not so utterly crucified it as to be able to say that she too had been obedient even unto death. Yet while she pondered on the awful purity of God, in whose sight the heavens are not pure and the strong pillars tremble, she did not give way to discouragement at the view of her imperfections, knowing that mercy is no less one of God's attributes than purity ; and she counsels others not to endeavour to wash away the stains of their souls with too much rigour—that is to say, without remembering God's infinite goodness ; for if the rust is scoured too eagerly the vessel itself is apt to be broken.

Once, when she was praying most earnestly to the Blessed Virgin for purity of soul, Our Lady took a garment of spotless whiteness and held it out to her for her acceptance. The devils did all in their power, as she thought, to prevent her from taking it, but she invoked Mary's help with greater earnestness and they fled, so that she was enabled to clothe herself with this beautiful garment. She was most anxious not to stain it, and asked Our Lady how she might preserve it spotless. The Blessed Virgin told her to keep herself from all vanity ; and to be especially careful to watch over her eyes, to fly from every pleasure that was not in God, to avoid all idle words, and not to employ herself in any work which had not God for its end.

It is not known exactly when or how our Lord first revealed Himself to Mechtilde, and began with her that familiar intercourse which can only be likened to the conversation between friend and friend. All that we are told is that she was still very young when, on account of her fidelity to grace and her great progress in virtue, Our Lord



deigned to pour out His favours upon her. She seems to have been very silent about the graces she had received, except to one or two persons who were the most intimate with her and who received similar favours. However, her sweet character powerfully attracted the hearts of those who lived with her, so that we read how from the first all loved her and sought to be with her. She was so tender-hearted in regard to the sufferings of others, whether of mind or body, that she could never do enough for those in trouble, consoling and helping them like the most loving of mothers. Hence no one ever went to her for comfort who did not come away strengthened and encouraged. As might be expected, the reputation of her sanctity could not very long be kept within the limits of her cloister home, and we hear of people of every description coming to seek counsel in doubt, and spiritual remedies for the various ailments of their souls. Prominent among those who sought help from St. Mechtilde were some learned Dominicans, who thought themselves privileged to come in contact with so holy a soul. St. Gertrude, who has left these facts on record, exclaims in a transport of enthusiasm, "Never has there arisen one like to her in our monastery; nor, alas! I fear, will there ever arise another such!" She little thought in her humility that she herself was destined to surpass her.

It is very beautiful to see how, in every difficulty brought to Mechtilde to solve, no matter how small, she always turned to God for the solution, or prayed for the strength necessary for the one in trouble, thus proving how clearly she felt that apart from Him she was utterly powerless. For instance, we read how the Saint consulted Our Lord about one who could not bring herself to forgive another, and Our Lord said, "Tell her to give her enemy into my keeping, and I will give her Myself and my saints as her eternal reward in heaven." Another time, one of the nuns was suffering from great depression which she could not shake off, and Mechtilde spoke of it in prayer to God, who vouchsafed to her this answer, "How can she be sad, when she remembers that I am her Father, since I have created her

for Myself; I am her Mother, for I have redeemed her; and I am her Brother, since I have destined her to share My kingdom?" On another occasion we find her complaining sweetly to her Beloved, because He had allowed one of the nuns to be ill on a great feast, so that she could not sing in choir; and, again, interceding for one who could not keep her attention during the Divine Office. On this occasion Our Lord told her that if at the end of each hour any one would say with attention, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" she would obtain the pardon of her negligence and wandering of mind.

But, as we have seen, it was not only her own sisters in Religion who came to her in their difficulties. We read of one poor gentleman who was labouring under a grievous temptation. He had sought help from many holy men, but could get no relief. At length Mechtilde's reputation having reached him, he determined to go to her, though she lived a very long way off. He came and unburdened his soul to her; and she, having comforted him with her kindly words, dismissed him with a promise to pray for him. The next day he returned to thank her most gratefully, for his temptation had completely vanished and he had never before felt so strengthened and consoled.

Another time, a Dominican came to beg her prayers on account of a number of worries, small in themselves, but which disturbed his peace of mind. As she was praying Our Lord said to her, "It would be just as easy for me to remove those little troubles from the friar for whom you are praying as for a man to brush away flies; but I do not wish to do so in order that he may learn, by being himself tempted in trifles, how to help and advise others; therefore let him know that these things will do him no more harm than so many flies."

Again, when she was interceding for one who seems to have been the Superior of his convent, Our Lord said to her, "Tell him when he preaches to take My Heart for his trumpet, and when he teaches to take My Heart for his book; and let him impress on the friars these three points:

(1) that they should avoid all human gratification ; (2) that they should fly from all kinds of honour ; and (3) that they should never have anything except what is strictly necessary."

As regards her love for sinners, she had drawn it from the very source of love—that Heart which is ever beating with the excess of Its yearning after those who have gone astray. With what fervour she cried to heaven for mercy on poor sinners, and how efficacious were her prayers, we learn from Our Lord's own words to her ; for He revealed to her that, on one single occasion, one hundred sinners had been converted in answer to her prayer. Could we have a more striking instance of the immense power of prayer, or a stronger incentive to devote ourselves to so fruitful an apostolate ?

We come now to the crowning grace of Mechtilde's life—that grace by which our Lord deigned to reveal to her the love of His Sacred Heart for all mankind. So far as we know, St. Gertrude and St. Mechtilde were the first to whom Our Divine Lord spoke explicitly of this organ of Divine Love, which in these our own times has become one of the greatest objects of Catholic devotion. It happened on a Wednesday in Easter Week that while she was assisting at Mass, at the words of the Introit "Come ye blessed," her soul was filled with an intense desire of being one day among those who have heard these longed-for words. Then Our Lord appeared to her and said, "Be assured that one day you will be in that blessed company ; and as a pledge of My promise I give to you My Heart, which you will keep until I have accomplished my words. It shall be to you a place of refuge during life, and after death you shall rest in It for evermore." This vision was one of the first vouchsafed to her ; and from that day forth she had the greatest possible devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Scarcely ever did He appear to her afterwards without giving her some special grace, or revealing to her fresh depths of the love of His Heart. She said herself, that if all the favours

she had received from the Sacred Heart were written down they would fill a large book.

Once, after Holy Communion, she saw Our Lord take her heart and unite it to His own, so that the two hearts formed but one ; and He said to her, "So should the hearts of all men be united to Mine." He often told her how He longed for men to make Him some return for all His excess of love, saying, "Nothing gives me so much pleasure as the heart of man, yet how often am I deprived of it ! I have everything else in abundance, but many and many a time I have to long in vain for a human heart." And again He told her that the greatest desire He had was for the conversion of sinners ; and that the moment a sinner is truly sorry for his sins, He clasps him to His Sacred Heart with as much love as though he had never sinned at all. Another time, at the elevation of the Host, she saw Our Lord offering His Sacred Heart, all flaming with love, to His eternal Father for sinners. On one Friday she had a vision of Our Lord standing at the altar with His hands outstretched, while blood flowed copiously from His Heart and sacred wounds, as though they had been but now transfixed ; and He said to her, "See how all My wounds have broken out afresh to appease My Father for the sins of men !"

Tender-hearted and compassionate as Mechtilde ever was to every form of suffering, it was but natural that she should have a very special devotion to the holy souls in Purgatory, and that she should be unremitting in her endeavours to help and comfort them. During her lifetime many of the nuns died in the odour of sanctity ; and as Mechtilde prayed for the repose of their souls, Our Lord, on several occasions, revealed to her the glory which they already enjoyed in Paradise. He told her, too, that there was nothing so precious in His sight in heaven or on earth as the purity of a virginal soul ; that His Father awaits the arrival of such souls in heaven with greater joy than any king could await the arrival of the bride of his only son ; that as soon as the news spreads itself that a virgin is about to enter her heavenly home, all the angels and saints are

transported with joy, and He Himself, rising from His throne, goes to meet her, saying, "Come, my love, my spouse, come and be crowned!"

As Mechtilde was praying, on another occasion, for the souls of B. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas, who both preceded her to the grave, she was privileged to see the inestimable glory which crowned their labours, especially their writings. Several of the Dominican fathers who had been intimate with her in life, and whom she had helped and advised, also appeared to her in glory.

Sometimes, also, she saw the souls of those who, by their sins, had not as yet been admitted to the vision of God. In 1294 the young Count of Mansfield died after a short but apparently excellent life. Mechtilde saw his soul, on the day of his death, prostrate at Our Lord's feet; and he was weeping bitterly because his contrition in life had arisen rather from fear than from love of God. Thirty days after his death, as Mass was being offered for him, she saw him again, and asked whether he suffered any pain. He answered, "Only this, that I am still deprived of the vision of God, whom I long to see with such an excess of longing, that if all the desires of all men in the world were merged into one they would not equal the longing of my soul for God."

Our Lord once showed her how, in Purgatory, the punishment is proportioned and, as it were, suitable to the sin. Thus she saw those who had been proud, falling from one abyss to another; those who had been disobedient and who had not kept their Rule, compelled to walk about with an enormous load on their backs which weighed them almost to the ground; those who had sinned through gluttony apparently dying of hunger and panting for a drop of water; those who had indulged in sins of the flesh seemingly roasted alive; and so on, according to their different vices. Mechtilde was filled with pity at this sad sight, and as she prayed with redoubled fervour she saw great numbers released. Not only on this occasion, but again and again she had the consolation of experiencing the

great efficacy of prayer and penance in bringing relief to the prisoners in Almighty God's prison house.

The friendship which had sprung up between St. Mechtilde and St. Gertrude at the very outset of Gertrude's religious life had ripened as the years passed into intimacy. The similarity of the favours bestowed on them by Our Divine Lord, together with the sympathy which naturally existed between two souls who loved God so earnestly, and whose only object was to please Him, caused them mutually to confide to each other God's favours to them. St. Gertrude had an enthusiastic admiration for St. Mechtilde, and carefully noted down all she told her, yet with the utmost secrecy, for fear of being discovered and stopped. However, at last, when Mechtilde was over fifty, in some way she got to know what Gertrude had done, and was in the greatest possible distress about it, her humility naturally shrinking from having her revelations made public. As usual she went for comfort to her heavenly Spouse, telling Him of her trouble. He appeared to her, holding in His hand the book in which the revelations He had made to her were written, and He said, "All this has been committed to writing by My will and inspiration, and therefore you have no cause to be troubled about it." When she asked Our Lord whether she should cease to make known His favours, He told her that, as He had been so generous towards her, she also ought to act with a like generosity towards Him, and that the publishing of the revelations would cause many to increase in love for Him; further, that He wished the revelations to be called *The Book of Special Grace*, because it would prove so to many. When Mechtilde understood that the book was to tend to glorify God, and not herself, she ceased to be troubled, and even consented to correct the manuscript, and in doubtful passages to consult Our Lord about it. After her death it was published with the consent of the Bishop of the diocese. Yet it is especially stated that all which was written down was very little compared with the revelations which were never chronicled. St. Gertrude tells us that she had reason

to know that many of the most intimate favours granted by our Lord to St. Mechtilde were never spoken of by her, partly because she could find no words to express anything so sublime, and partly because they would surpass the understanding of the greater part of men and be subject to misconception.

In 1291, that is about seven years before St. Mechtilde's own death, she was called upon to make a very great sacrifice in the person of her sister and Abbess, Gertrude of Hackeborn, who died in the odour of sanctity after she had governed the Monastery for many years. Of her holy life and precious death St. Gertrude thus speaks in Book V. of the *Herald of Divine Love*: "Dame Gertrude, our venerable Abbess, fulfilled her office for forty years with wisdom, sweetness, prudence, and admirable discretion, to the glory of God and the advantage of her neighbour. She lived in a most fervent love and devotion towards God, with wonderful tenderness and watchfulness towards others, and in humility with regard to herself. She was ever most careful to visit the sick, to procure them all necessaries, to serve them with her own hands, to recreate them and to comfort them in their needs. Not only in this was she always the first, but also in sweeping the cloisters and setting in order what was out of place; often labouring alone until, by her example, other sisters were led to help her. Her life had bloomed like a beautiful rose in the sight of God and man when, after forty years, she was seized with apoplexy. All those who knew her well can understand how deeply the shaft, aimed by the hand of the Most High to bring back to Himself from this miserable world that noble soul so full of virtues, sank into the hearts of all those who had lived under her guidance."

Her daughters, fearing that if they were deprived of the light, the example, and the guidance of so tender a mother they might forsake the straight paths of perfection, took refuge in most earnest prayer to the Father of mercies, begging for her cure. As He is sovereignly good, He did

not disdain the prayers of His poor children, and, though it was not expedient that He should hear them by curing their mother, at least He heard by consoling them, and making them share by their joy in her beatitude. For five whole months the Abbess was deprived of the use of speech, so that, not being able to express her wishes or her wants, frequently the very opposite to what she required was done by those attending her. She showed not the slightest sign of annoyance at this: only at times she would smile sweetly at her incapacity to make herself understood. When the nuns, who visited her constantly during that time, expressed their grief on account of her sufferings and their fear of losing her, she comforted them by signs and showed her grateful sense of their love.

She had lost the use of one leg by her malady, and the other—on which she supported herself—caused her intense pain; yet she would try to hide the agony she endured that she might not be prevented from dragging herself to the Choir for daily Mass, at which she assisted with such attention as to appear insensible to her pain; while the tears which she shed during the celebration of the adorable Mysteries bore witness to the devotion of her heart. The day before her death she asked to be carried to the bedside of one of the nuns, who was also very ill, in order to console her by her blessing and presence—for, as we have already said, she could not speak.<sup>1</sup> She was then carried back to her own bed, Extreme Unction was administered, and she entered into her agony. St. Gertrude was kneeling beside her, and she saw Our Lord enter the room, accompanied by His Blessed Mother and St. John the Evangelist, to whom the Abbess was particularly devout; while in the corner she saw a number of chained devils giving vent to their rage at the triumph of one who had so completely overcome them. She noticed that Christ and His holy companions kept near the bed of the dying Abbess, who breathed out her soul into the hands of her Divine Spouse as the words of

<sup>1</sup> This was probably St. Mechtilde, who was very ill at the time, and unable to be with her sister.



the Passion, "inclinato capite, emisit spiritum" were being read aloud by one of the sisters attending her.

The Religious then assembled for the funeral rites of their beloved mother and Abbess. When they brought her body into the church they prostrated before the Altar, offering to God their tears, and begging for strength and resignation in the heavy cross He had laid upon them, when suddenly the saintly Abbess appeared before them in great glory and, as though still fulfilling her office of Superior and mother, presented a petition to the Blessed Trinity in favour of all those who had been under her care.

The death, so precious in the sight of God, of her sister and Abbess, made St. Mechtilde now look forward all the more expectantly to the hour of her own release, for which she had not much longer to wait. From that time she began to grow more infirm, and her sufferings redoubled, so that she was obliged to keep her bed. She was often disturbed in her mind on account of the trouble she gave to the nuns who waited upon her, and also because she feared that they took too much care of her, and gave her more than was absolutely necessary. At last Our Lord set her heart at rest on this point by telling her that she need have no fear, since He took as done for Himself all that was done for her, and rewarded those who had nursed her as though they had nursed Himself, counting every step they took in her service. Mechtilde's humble diffidence betrays itself in her fear of giving trouble to others, but the nuns looked upon it in quite another light, and considered themselves privileged if they might be with her. Besides, they still continued to come to her in their troubles and difficulties, and she never appeared too weary or too ill to listen to them. Even at the last, when she could scarcely speak, we read of the sisters coming to her with the different intentions they particularly wished her to commend to God, or with those of their friends; and if she could say no more, she would at least show her interest, and answer, "Yes, willingly." At times, when the convulsive movements of

her body showed how she was racked with pain, she would still find a smile and a pressure of the hand for those around her. Before her death she asked the Blessed Virgin to take under her special protection the nuns she was about to take leave of, telling her that as during life she had tried always, in every way in her power, to help them, so, now that she was about to die, she entrusted them with great confidence to her motherly care ; and Our Lady, tenderly caressing her, promised to love and protect them with a special affection.

At length, on the last Sunday but one after Pentecost, in the year 1298, Mechtilde understood that her end was at hand, and began to prepare for her passage into eternity. She had been ill so long, and had so often seemed at the point of death, that her superiors did not think that there was at present any immediate danger of death, and would have delayed the administration of the last Sacraments. But Gertrude, who was nursing her, and was a witness to all the wonderful favours vouchsafed to her in those last days, begged her superior not to put off the giving of Extreme Unction, seeing that she had but a few days to live. On Tuesday she fell into her agony, and all the nuns assembled round her to assist her with the accustomed prayers. During her long agony, which lasted nearly two days, her sufferings were intense, and she would gasp out from time to time the words, "O good Jesus! O sweet Jesus!" showing how in the midst of cruel pains her heart was at peace. Several times during the day and night the sisters assembled round her to recite the prayers for the dying, thinking that her strength must give way. Yet she still lingered on ; and when St. Gertrude asked Our Lord the reason why, He answered, "Because, although she is racked with divers and continual pains, yet, trusting always in My love, she believes it will profit her unto eternal salvation ; and, persevering in unceasing thanksgiving, she, with perfect confidence, commits herself to My providence."

On Wednesday, however, November 19th, the joyful day arrived upon which Christ had resolved to give to His faithful spouse the sleep of eternal repose after all the

fatigues, weariness, and sufferings of this her earthly pilgrimage. Those who were watching by Mechtilde—amongst them the Abbess Sophia and St. Gertrude—suddenly saw her whole face light up with an expression of unutterable sweetness, while by her gestures (for she was speechless) she seemed to be inviting them to share in her joy. Then St. Gertrude saw Our Divine Lord enter the sick room in all His Majesty; and, standing by the bedside, He began to sing in a voice surpassing all description as a return for the many times when Mechtilde had charmed His Divine Heart by the sweetness of her singing and the fervour of her devotion. And the words He sang were these: "Come, blessed of My Father, and take possession of the kingdom prepared for you," thus ratifying the promise He had made her so many years before, when He gave her His Sacred Heart as a pledge. "And now," He continued, "where is My pledge?" Upon which Mechtilde restored to Him His Sacred Heart, and with It her own, to rest on It for evermore, and taste of Its delights for all eternity. "There," continues St. Gertrude, "may she be mindful of those who think of her, and may she by her holy prayers obtain for us at least some drops of that superabundance of delights from Him with whom she now forms but one spirit, and with whom she will triumph for ever."

The day after Mechtilde's death, St. Gertrude and another holy soul were privileged to receive a most consoling revelation concerning her. Our Lord told them that, by an excess of His goodness, not a single Christian had gone to hell on the day she left the world; that all the sinners who had died that day had repented in answer to her prayers; and that He had not allowed those who had hardened their hearts against every grace to expire until the following day in order that so terrible a judgement as that of damnation should not have to be passed on a day of such great solemnity, and of such unmingled joy to Himself and the whole heavenly court.

Finally Our Lord promised that He would look with special love on all those who should have a devotion to

St. Mechtilde for His sake ; that He would draw them more closely to Himself ; and that all who should give Him thanks for the favours He had bestowed upon her should have a share in her merits, and great consolation at the hour of death.

A PRAYER TAKEN FROM THE OFFICE OF ST. MECHTILDE.

O God, who in the most devoted heart of Thy Virgin, Mechtilde, didst make for Thyself a pleasing dwelling-place, grant to us, we beseech Thee, by the intercession of this holy Virgin, that while we live we may be always raised in spirit from earthly to heavenly things, and may likewise triumph with her in the resurrection of the just. Amen.

## ST. GERTRUDE THE GREAT

(1256-1301)

ST. GERTRUDE, distinguished by the title of "the Great," was born on the Feast of the Epiphany, 1256, and belonged to the noble house of the Counts of Lachenborn, in Saxony. Before beginning to give an account of her life, it may be well to say at the outset that we shall look in vain for great or striking actions according to the ideas of the world. Gertrude was essentially a contemplative Saint, leading exteriorly a hidden, ordinary life—the perfect type of a Benedictine nun; and her claim to the title of "Great" rests, not on the opinion or praise of men, but on the words of Our Lord Himself. He made known to St. Mechtilde that, after the Blessed Sacrament, there was no dwelling so pleasing to Him as the heart of Gertrude; and in the Office of her Feast we read that "Christ was wont to speak to His beloved Gertrude face to face, as a man is accustomed to speak to his friend."

Perhaps a simple record of God's dealings with this chosen soul will be an efficient answer to that oft-repeated question, "What is the use of an enclosed nun?" Those who work among the sick and poor are justly appreciated and admired; but that people should go and shut themselves up and, as is supposed, do no

good to any one else, passes the understanding of the majority in our matter-of-fact age. The practical development of such an idea would lead men to conclude that the time passed in praising and worshipping God is time wasted, or, at least, time spent in a less useful manner and less pleasing to God Himself than that occupied in active works of charity. Yet we read in the Holy Scripture that the Cherubim and Seraphim, the highest and most perfect of all God's creatures, are continually standing before His throne and crying out, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts!" The contemplative Orders have been called by spiritual writers the "angels of the earth," as their great duty and occupation is the unceasing praise and worship of their Creator. This praise is the end for which all men were created, and will be the everlasting occupation of all who are saved; but it is only given to a chosen few to begin, even in this world, to live the life that the Blessed lead in Heaven.

Again, the duty of a contemplative Religious is to keep Our Divine Lord company in the Sacrament of His love, to console Him for the ingratitude of some and to make reparation for the malice of others. The Blessed Sacrament must ever be the centre of her cloister home, the magnet of her heart; here at least it can suffer no neglect, no forgetfulness, for even when engaged with her daily duties she leaves her heart at her Lord's feet. And, lastly, besides repairing, as far as in her lies, the sins of a guilty world by prayer and penance, she is ever supplicating, interceding, drawing down from Heaven that dew of divine grace and infinite mercy which, softening the hardest heart, leads the sinner repentant to the feet of the missionary, the prodigal to his father.

How perfectly Gertrude fulfilled these three duties is abundantly proved even in the few details that remain to

us of her life, and by Our Lord's words concerning her—that He could refuse nothing to her prayers. From her earliest childhood she gave signs of future sanctity, and from the moment reason began to dawn in her infant mind the Holy Spirit seems to have constituted Himself her only Guide, so taking possession of her heart and affections that at five years of age she had already determined to consecrate herself to Christ as His spouse. This resolve, which she formed secretly in her heart, she soon found means to carry into execution. She entreated her parents to send her to the Monastery at Helfta; and having gained her point she entered the house of God, a child indeed in years, but with a mind already far advanced in the knowledge of God and the things of God, and with a firm resolve never more to leave the Monastery. This house had been founded some years before Gertrude's birth by Burchard, Count of Mansfield, at Rodersdorf, from whence the Community afterwards removed to Helfta. At the time of her entrance the Monastery was governed by the Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn, who, on account of her great virtue, was unanimously elected in 1251, at the age of nineteen, to succeed the first Abbess Cunegonde. She governed the Monastery forty years. The learned monks of Solesmes in their preface to the *Herald of Divine Love*, published in 1877, have proved very clearly that our Saint Gertrude the Great was never an Abbess, as had hitherto been commonly supposed. In course of time the names of the two Gertrudes had become confounded, and St. Gertrude was erroneously believed to have been Abbess and sister to St. Mechtilde; whereas St. Mechtilde was in reality sister to the Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn.

St. Gertrude, in the first chapter of Book V. of the *Herald of Divine Love*, gives a vivid picture of the

virtues of her Abbess, and of the love with which she inspired all who came in contact with her. She says, "I do not think that throughout the world one could be found endowed with more abundant gifts of nature and of grace; and, though she received into the Monastery and trained over a hundred persons, I never heard any one of them say that they had more affection for another than for their Abbess; even the little children were as tenderly attached to her as to their own mothers."

It was to this loving and tender mother that Gertrude was entrusted by her parents, and we shall see in the course of this history how the child profited by her counsels and instructions. She had not been at Helfta many days before it became evident that she was destined to serve as an example to the other children, and as an object of veneration to the nuns. In order to advance steadily in perfection, she practised a continual remembrance of the presence of God, together with careful self-examination in order to discover whether any of her actions fell short of her desire to please Him. This practice inclined her to silence and solitude, so that before she was bound to the Rule she kept it faithfully.

By nature Gertrude was mild and obliging, and to this she joined a certain gravity of manner which secured for her the respect and reverence of her Sisters, while her sweetness attracted their love. Having passed through the novitiate, and bound herself by the vows of religion, she began to manifest an extraordinary affection for study, and a mind so well adapted to the acquisition of knowledge that her Superior thought good to allow her to study Latin thoroughly and also to begin the study of philosophy. She was even permitted to pass to that of theology, in which she became so proficient that she was considered the oracle of her age. Never-



theless, although this life of study was in itself most useful and was pursued with the approbation of her Superiors, it proved, in her case, an obstacle to grace and a hindrance to her spiritual advancement. The sensible delight which she took in her studies usurped the place of that which she had formerly experienced in prayer, and she even went so far as to shorten the time given to this holy exercise in order to devote herself more to her books.

This slight infidelity tarnished the purity of her soul ; and her Divine Spouse, who deigned to be jealous of her perfection, opened her eyes to her fault and manifested to her the pride and curiosity to which she had secretly yielded, under a frightful form which He impressed on her imagination, causing her an intense agony at the sight of the time that she had thus misspent in the indulgence of self-gratification. This sorrow was so great that nothing could have consoled her, had not Our Lord come Himself to forgive her and restore her peace of mind. This He did after Complin, on the Feast of the Purification of Our Blessed Lady. Gertrude was walking down the dormitory when, on meeting one of the Religious, she bowed her head according to the Rule, and at the same moment she saw Our Lord standing before her. He appeared to be about sixteen years of age, and was so beautiful that she was ravished at the sight. He took her hand and told her that He wished her to banish all sadness from her heart, for He forgave her all her past infidelities, and would treat her in future as His spouse. Gertrude was twenty-five years old when she received this favour in 1281. She afterwards acknowledged that from that moment she never lost the sense of the Presence of God, and that she always found Him in the innermost depths of her heart. She did not speak thus to glorify herself, or to attribute to her own

merits what she knew she owed entirely to the mercy of God, but she desired to make it known that all glory might be given to Him. She poured forth her thanksgiving to Our Lord in the following words: "Thou hast never let me seek Thee in vain! Whenever I return to Thee from the distractions of creatures I find Thee waiting for me in my heart. Only once, for eleven days, Thou didst put a cloud between us to hide from me the brightness of Thy countenance, leaving me in a state of abandonment more bitter a thousand times than death to such as know what it is to lose Thee through their own fault."

Our Lord now began to bestow such wonderful favours on St. Gertrude, that not only was she prompted to conceal them out of humility, but also because she feared that, being in their nature so far above human understanding, they would not be believed. But He, Who worked these wonders in her, took upon Himself to disclose them to some chosen souls in the monastery, and when Gertrude discovered this she said to Him, "Thou art my witness, O my God, that I never communicate Thy secrets to any one; it must therefore be Thyself Who hast made known to these others what has passed between me and Thee." This intimate intercourse between her soul and God wrought a wonderful change in Gertrude; it effaced the images of creatures from her mind, and it caused her to withdraw her heart from an inordinate love for knowledge in order to keep it all for God. She was thus raised to a state of sublime perfection, and her advancement was not effected in the ordinary way, by different degrees acquired successively, but God accomplished His work in her soul by one gift of His grace. He thus gave her in one instant all the advantages which others have only obtained after long years of penance.

She had acquired a profound knowledge of the mysteries of God, partly by means of the studies she had pursued, but chiefly by the light of the Holy Spirit vouchsafed to her in prayer.

Though, as we have said, Gertrude was never Abbess of her monastery, it is evident that on account of her singular holiness and gift of discernment of spirits, the nuns were not only allowed, but encouraged, to seek help and advice from her. Thus she was enabled to enkindle in the hearts of others the flame of divine love which burned in her own; and she considered it her duty to communicate it to all who came under her influence. Yet, withal, her purity of intention was such that any word of praise uttered in regard to her gave her intolerable pain, feeling convinced that the favours bestowed on her were given her for the advantage of others rather than for her own. This conviction made her always ready to give advice or comfort to those who sought it from her, gladly leaving all other occupations to attend to this duty. She would even abandon the sweetness of contemplation, which was her chief delight, at the call of a Sister in distress; and she would sacrifice not only her spiritual repose, but also that of her body, to spend the night in ministering to the relief of the suffering, sparing herself no labour in attending to their wants.

Yet, while she performed these acts of lovingkindness, she was ever on the watch to check any excess of natural affection which the Sisters might have for her, to the prejudice of the pure love of God which she desired to see reigning in their hearts. She was always fearful of this danger, not only in her intercourse with them, but also with the seculars who came to consult her on affairs of conscience. When the case required reprehension, the wisdom of God seemed to speak by her

mouth, nor would she leave the guilty parties until she had softened their hearts and won them to repentance. Her Sisters were so convinced of her power to obtain from God whatever she asked that they thought themselves secure of a remedy for all their temptations and troubles by merely mentioning them to her. On one occasion a Sister, finding herself grievously tormented by a temptation, took a little object belonging to Gertrude and pressed it to her heart, and immediately the temptation vanished.

St. Gertrude's zeal did not confine itself to helping individual souls. She was always eager for the general welfare of her own monastery, and of those with whom she corresponded, or was in any way connected, endeavouring to encourage in them religious perfection and discipline by the exact observance of the Rule. Her love for the beauty of God's house was increased by a vision, in which she saw Our Saviour bearing on His shoulders a large house, giving her to understand that those who restore and maintain strict observance are to Him pillars of support which ease Him of His burden.

It was fitting that Our Lord should Himself make known to certain chosen souls the wonderful works He had wrought in Gertrude, since she was so careful to hide in the secret of her heart all that could attract the notice and esteem of others. This leads us to consider her profound humility, which resulted from the extraordinary graces bestowed upon her. In her case, as the graces were the more sublime, so was the corresponding humility the more profound. It was this true humility which led her sincerely to believe that God manifested the greatest miracle of His patience by allowing the earth to bear her, and this at a time when she was being treated as an oracle, and consulted on all sides by

persons who sought to be enlightened by her in their doubts and difficulties. She, meanwhile, yielded with the submission of a child to the direction of those who had the care of her soul. She practised with the utmost fidelity every point of her Rule, and would never dispense herself without the most urgent necessity.

One day, Our Lord revealed to St. Mechtilde, who lived in the same monastery, the sublime state of perfection to which St. Gertrude was raised. She saw the Son of God on a throne of majesty, and St. Gertrude at His feet, with her eyes fixed immovably on Him, never withdrawing them from Him, although at the same time engaged in her different duties. Our Lord then told St. Mechtilde that it was in this way that St. Gertrude lived, keeping her mind and heart ever attentive to Him who was always present to her soul, while she was fulfilling His holy Will in her actions. St. Mechtilde, presuming on the familiarity with which Our Lord likewise treated her, said to Him, "I wonder, O my God, how it is that she, being so highly enlightened, should yet be so strict with regard to the faults of others?" Our Lord replied that this was owing to her great aversion to sin, and to her great love for her Sisters, causing her to feel as much pain for the faults which she saw in them as for the faults she saw in herself.

Several persons having consulted Gertrude as to the practice of frequent Communion, she advised them to adopt it; but afterwards she feared she had given the advice without sufficient consideration, and she was much troubled in her mind. She made known her fears to Our Lord in prayer, and He assured her that the advice she had given came from Him, and added that He would not allow any one whom He foresaw would profane the Holy Sacrament to consult her on the

subject. The loving promise restored the tranquillity of her soul.

Our Lord also revealed this favour to St. Mechtilde as she was praying one day for St. Gertrude. He said that whenever Gertrude judged any one to be worthily disposed for Holy Communion He ratified her judgement, or rather, that Gertrude's soul was so united to the Holy Spirit that she had no other light wherewith to form her judgement but that which He communicated to her, and so she acted always in conformity to His holy Will.

It was a great consolation to St. Gertrude to have St. Mechtilde in the same monastery, since, on account of her sanctity and the favours she had received from God, Gertrude could confide in her and seek help from her in the interior trials, troubles, and perplexity which her revelations occasioned her. At these times she would beg St. Mechtilde to consult Our Lord as to whether she was under a delusion, trusting with great confidence in the advice of one who was herself so highly gifted and enlightened.

In the second year of Gertrude's new spiritual life, as she herself relates, Our Divine Lord placed His seal upon her ardent love by imprinting on her His sacred Stigmata. Five years after this, as she was preparing for Holy Communion, she experienced such extraordinary feelings of divine love that she was convinced some new favour was about to be bestowed upon her; and, in fact, when she returned to her place to make her thanksgiving, she saw a ray of light proceeding from the Crucifix in the church. It seemed to come from Our Lord's wounded Side, and to pierce her inmost heart, while she heard these words: "Henceforth let all your affections be centred here, and let all the passions of

your soul, whether of joy, hope, sorrow, or fear be dissolved in My love."

Our Lord, in His love for this chosen soul, manifested Himself to her in various ways, according to the different mysteries celebrated by the Church. Thus, at Christmas-time, she would often see Him in the arms of His blessed Mother, who would place her Divine Child in Gertrude's arms, and clothe her by this means with the innocence and purity of the holy Infant. In the same way she participated in the graces of the other mysteries of Our Lord's life, and these favours always produced efficacious fruits in her soul.

Another mark of God's singular predilection was shown to her when He gave her Our blessed Lady to be her Mother, promising that she would assist her in all her difficulties and sufferings. This Gertrude ever after experienced, especially in times of sickness, for then Our Lady seemed to redouble her care and favours towards her.

She had a true Benedictine love for the Liturgy of Holy Church, and entered heart and soul into the spirit of all the festivals of the Christian cycle. In her revelations we find that on nearly all these days she received some extraordinary grace from God in conformity with the mystery the Church was celebrating.

Dom Gueranger, in his preface to the *Exercises of St. Gertrude*, says that the especial characteristic of the piety of St. Gertrude towards the Incarnate Word is her devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Our Lord Himself continually excited her to this devotion, for again and again He presented to her view His Sacred Heart in token of the intimate union which He willed to maintain with her; and He even vouchsafed in one ineffable revelation to exchange it for that of the holy virgin, who thus felt her Divine Spouse live and love within her.

St. Gertrude herself tells us, in the fourth Book of her writings, how on one occasion when she was speaking with St. John of the delights he experienced when resting his head on the Sacred Heart at the Last Supper, she asked him why he had kept such absolute silence as to what he had felt and drunk in from that abyss of divine love; and St. John told her that it was reserved for later times to experience all the sweetness of its pulsations, so that the world, grown cold with age, might recover some degree of warmth from hearing of the mysteries of that Sacred Heart. St. Mechtilde and the rest of the Community united with St. Gertrude in this glorious devotion, which spread gradually to other houses of her Order; and the Heart of Jesus had already been long an object of special adoration and love to the sons and daughters of St. Benedict, when in the seventeenth century it pleased God to claim for it, through the instrumentality of Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque, of the Order of the Visitation, that more solemn worship with which it is now surrounded. In our times we can see how fully the promise made to St. Gertrude has been realized, and how when men were striving to substitute a religion of servile fear for that of filial love, Our Lord deigned to invite, not only the favoured few, but all mankind, to come and rest upon His Sacred Heart, permitting them to honour with a special worship the organ of His love for them.

It would be impossible in this short sketch to recount all the favours that are known to have been bestowed by Our Lord upon this chosen soul, whom He deigned to treat with such loving familiarity as His Spouse and intimate friend, confiding secrets to her which we are not worthy to understand. The devil was naturally filled with envy at the sight of one so holy, and did



all in his power to disturb her peace of mind and tranquillity. One day when she was reciting her Office with some precipitation she saw him at her side, and as she began each verse of the psalm he would take it up and hasten through it, leaving many words half articulated; and when he had finished he turned to her and said in a mocking tone, "God has favoured you greatly in giving you such a fluent tongue! You really praise Him finely, and it is a pleasure to hear you hurrying through your Office like this! In only one psalm you have omitted several syllables." Gertrude did not fail to profit by the devil's mockery, and learned hereby how vigilant Satan is in noticing the faults we commit in the divine service.

Another time she was busy spinning wool, and in the course of her work she threw some tufts on the ground, which the devil hastened to collect as a proof that she had been wanting in her vow of poverty. In many similar instances Satan endeavoured to trouble her peace of mind on account of her little imperfections, but her Divine Spouse was ever at hand to dispel her fear by His sweet presence and to prevent her giving way to discouragement at the sight of her faults.

Among the many miracles with which Our Lord rewarded St. Gertrude's childlike trust in Him—turning to Him, as she did in every emergency, with the most absolute confidence in His goodness—two are recorded in the Office of her Feast of her power over the elements. In the first instance, we read of how the winter one year had been exceptionally long, and the ground was frozen so hard that when the springtime came it showed no sign of yielding its produce. Then Gertrude prayed lovingly to Our Lord during Mass, telling Him of her compassion for the poor country folk and asking Him to bring a thaw. No sooner was Mass over than

the path outside the church was found covered with water, the sun was shining, and the ice and snow were melting fast. The change of weather was so sudden and unexpected that people shook their heads and said it could not last. They knew nothing of Gertrude's prayer, but her Divine Spouse did not do things by halves, and a sweet, warm spring came to gladden the whole country.

On another occasion the heavy and continued rains threatened to ruin the harvest, and the nuns redoubled their prayers for fear of losing their corn. Gertrude especially persisted in the petition, until she had obtained a promise from God to accede to her request. Then immediately the weather cleared and the rain was at an end.

We read again that sometimes she would obtain the intervention of her Spouse almost playfully: as when once she was working at an embroidery frame and she dropped her needle among the straw with which the floor was strewn. The other Sisters who were working with her heard her say, "O Lord, all my efforts could not find my needle in the straw—do Thou therefore find it for me!" and putting her hand among the straw, she found it instantly. Another proof of her reliance on God for the least detail is shown by the practice she had of shutting her eyes and taking the first thing that came whenever a choice was given her, whether of food, clothing, or any other object. She thus looked upon whatever she received as a gift direct from God, and was equally contented whether she had what was new or old, good or bad. Sometimes when she was taking her meals, she would say to Our Lord, "Accept, O my Divine Spouse, this service which I am rendering to the least of Thy little ones, as if it was done to Thyself." It was thus that she ever considered Christ as dwelling

in her ; and as she looked upon herself as the last and least of all, she considered that whatever she did or gave to herself was done or given to the least of Christ's little ones.

Her eager, impetuous love for Our Lord is touchingly exemplified in a beautiful little incident which she herself relates. She was praying one day before her Crucifix, compassionating the wounds of her Beloved, and pouring out her heart before her Saviour crucified for her sake, until at length, not being able to bear any longer the thought of those cruel iron nails which tore His sacred Hands and Feet, she took them from her Crucifix and in their place she substituted sweet-smelling cloves. Our Lord was so pleased with this tender act of love, that He vouchsafed in return to heal all the wounds left on her soul by sin. At this manifestation of divine condescension she pressed her Crucifix more tightly to her heart, and covered it again and again with kisses in an ecstasy of love, until at length, worn out by her long watch, she said to Our Lord : " Good-night now, my Beloved, let me sleep to renew my strength, for I am exhausted after meditating so long." And as she lay down to rest she saw Our Lord detach one arm from the Crucifix, and heard Him say as He embraced her, " My continual love excites your eager longing, while your tender love for Me gives Me the sweetest delight." Then He deigned to restore her strength by letting her rest on His sacred Bosom and drink from the wound in His Side.

Once when St. Gertrude was ill and had been suffering much all night, the time seemed to her so long that she began to feel depressed. Then Our Lord appeared to her, holding in one hand health, in the other sickness, and bade her choose between them. She generously refused to make a choice, declaring that she was

indifferent to the one or to the other so long as she did but accomplish the holy Will of God. This resignation rendered her yet more pleasing to her heavenly Spouse; and, causing her to rest upon His most Sacred Heart, He explained to her the advantage of sufferings.

Our Divine Lord exacted the utmost purity of intention and love from Gertrude on all occasions: so that once, when she complained to Him that a certain person whom she loved, and for whose perfection she had done much, only repaid her with ingratitude and despised her love, Our Lord made answer that He had permitted that she should receive this unkind treatment in order that she might understand once for all that it is vain to look for fidelity from creatures, and that she must expect it only from God.

The virtues of this great Saint were not only profitable to herself, but by means of her example many of the Religious of her Monastery were raised to a high degree of perfection; and she had the joy, even on earth, of seeing the degree of glory to which many who died before her had attained. She received also a special favour from Our Lord whereby she was enabled to see in what dispositions the nuns of her monastery were at the hour of their death, and to help those who were in purgatory; her love and charity being untiring in making efforts for their speedy release, never desisting until she saw them safe in their heavenly home.

When Gertrude was thirty-five years old, it pleased God to take to Himself the Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn. Her death must have been a very sensible grief to the holy Virgin, who was tenderly attached to her Superior, and had lived all her religious life under her motherly guidance. Gertrude of Hacke-

born was succeeded in the abbatial dignity by Sophia of Mansfield, who ruled the Monastery during the remainder of our Saint's lifetime. During the first year of her government, in 1292, the Emperor Rudolph of Hapsburgh died. There were two claimants to the Imperial throne, and the choice lay with the electors. They would probably have elected Albert, son of the late Emperor, but he had made himself unpopular with them on account of his harsh manner; and their choice therefore fell on Adolphus, Count of Nassau. At the time of the election the community of Helfta, knowing the grave issues at stake and the importance of a good, God-fearing ruler in the unsettled state in which their country then lay, all assembled in earnest prayer for the guidance and assistance of the Holy Ghost. As they were thus praying, Gertrude turned to her Abbess and told her that, contrary to their expectation, Adolphus of Nassau had been chosen, but that in a few years he would die a violent death at the hands of his rival. This prediction was verified when, on July 2, 1298, Adolphus was killed in battle by Albert, who thus took possession of his father's throne.

If it had not been by the express commands of the Divine Master, to which Gertrude was obliged to bow in submission, it is probable that she, like so many of God's most beautiful treasures, would have remained hidden and unknown to mankind until that great day when all hearts shall be revealed. In Gertrude's case, however, hidden as her life was, and little as we know of her in some respects, we have cause to thank God that He deigned to compel her, despite her natural shrinking, to commit to writing many of the favours He had bestowed on her. He told her it would tend to increase His glory, not hers; and the moment she

understood this she no longer hesitated to comply, except to seek to learn from Him how she was to set about her writing, not feeling any natural capacity for such a task. Our Divine Lord reassured her, and promised Himself to inspire her. Each time that she took up her pen, she wrote without the slightest effort so long as her Divine Spouse continued to inspire her, but when He thought she had written enough for one day He would leave her, and then she was not able, do what she would, to think of another word or to recall to mind a single grace or favour she had received. This reassured her greatly, as she felt that she was merely an instrument in God's hands, a channel through which He was to make known to men His goodness and His love.

Her writings are comprised in the five books known as *The Herald of Divine Love*. The first book was not written by herself, but by some nun of her monastery, and gives a short account of the miracles wrought by her, of some incidents in her life, and of her remarkable virtues. The second was written by Gertrude at the dictation and inspiration of Our Lord, as related above, and makes known the wonderful favours she received. The third, fourth, and fifth books were written most probably at her dictation. The third book is full of instruction suitable for all : as to how we may serve and please God ; how we may offer Him the merits of the Passion to atone for our sins ; how we may learn to love Him more ; how to approach the Sacraments ; and how to resign ourselves on all occasions to His good will and pleasure. The whole of the ninety short chapters are most consoling, breathing throughout the immense compassion which God extends to human weakness and the infinity of His mercy. The fourth book gives an account of the different favours she received on the

various festivals throughout the year, teaching us how we may best honour Christ and His Saints on the feasts established by the Church in their honour. The fifth book contains accounts of the holy deaths of several Religious of her monastery, and revelations concerning the souls in Purgatory and their deliverance, and her own preparation for death. Finally, our Lord promised her that whoever should read these books devoutly should receive great profit for their souls ; and that, on the contrary, He would humble and cast down any one who read them through with curiosity and a desire to pry into His secrets in order to censure and mock them.

The little book commonly known as the *Prayers of St. Gertrude*, is so popular that it needs no recommendation here ; but there is another book of devotions called the *Exercises of St. Gertrude* which is not so widespread, and yet is perhaps the most beautiful of all her writings. Speaking of it, Alban Butler says that some of the sighs by which she expresses her thirst after union with God are so heavenly that they seem rather to come from one already dwelling in Heaven than from a pilgrim in this mortal life ; and Dom Gueranger assures us that persons who will follow St. Gertrude in the week of Exercises she proposes to them, will come forth from these Exercises transformed in their whole being. They will return to them again and again with ever-increasing pleasure ; they will feel confounded indeed to be admitted so near the inmost heart of so great a Saint, but they will also feel that they have been created for the same end as that Saint, and that they must bestir themselves to quit all easy, dangerous ways which lead to perdition.

Gertrude was now nearly fifty years of age, and the

days of her exile were fast drawing to a close. Her life had been one of constant suffering, her natural delicacy having been increased by long and repeated illnesses. She tells us herself how, after her seventh severe illness, she had ventured to ask Our Lord if He would not vouchsafe to cure her. But her Divine Spouse desired only that she should resign herself entirely into His hands to do or not to do, to suffer or not to suffer, just as He willed. He told her it was not expedient for human frailty to know how much God intends it to bear, for oftentimes it would shrink at the sight. Throughout St. Gertrude's revelations of God's dealings with her soul we cannot fail to be struck by the immense value He places upon the intention and submission of the will. He told her once that what we do is nothing to Him, that it is absolutely immaterial to Him whether we are employed in mental or bodily exercises, provided that our intention is to please Him. Here we have the key to Gertrude's extraordinary sanctity, which God so valued that He could refuse nothing to her prayers, and that He found His chief delight in dwelling in her heart. In itself her life had nothing unusual about it; she lived quietly and peacefully in her monastery, either occupied with the daily routine of duties which fill the day of an enclosed nun, or stretched on a bed of sickness, apparently, perhaps, a burden to herself and useless to her community. Yet the love which animated her most trivial actions turned all she touched to gold; while the entire conformity of her will to that of her Divine Spouse in all the suffering she endured in being constantly deprived of taking part in the great festivals which were her chief delight, and in many similar trials, caused her union with God to be so perfected, even in this life, that she might truly have said, "I live now, not I, but Christ lives and reigns in me."



We all know what it is to yearn for the presence of one we love deeply, and our own experience may give us a faint idea of what Gertrude suffered until she could be dissolved and be with Christ. The greatest of Purgatory's torments is not the fire, nor even Heaven deferred, but the inability of the soul to satisfy its intense craving to gaze once more on the Beatific Vision which for one brief moment was vouchsafed to it at the judgement. So much did Gertrude languish with love that each year seemed like an eternity to her, and while she would not hasten her release one moment contrary to the Will of God, yet from time to time she would cry to Him, saying, "Though I am but the refuse of Thy creation, my one loving desire is to die and to be with Thee, to offer Thee the homage of my song of gladness in union with that happy company who sing Thy praises eternally in Heaven." Her intimate friend and confidant, St. Mechtilde, had already gone in 1298 to enjoy the delights of Paradise, and at length in 1300, on the Feast of St. Martin, November 12th, St. Gertrude said to her divine Spouse, "O Lord, when wilt Thou take me hence?" and He answered, "Very soon I will take thee from the world." At these words Gertrude was filled with joy and a yet more eager desire to die. On the following Easter Day, when she communicated, our Lord said to her, "Come, My beloved, I will make of thee My throne." Then she knew that the promise made to her on the Feast of St. Martin was about to be realized. Our Lord added, "Choose now whether you will die at once, or whether you will submit to a long illness, in order that your soul may be yet more perfectly adorned." And she answered, "O Lord, Thy will be done." Then Our Lord told her that she had done well to leave the choice to Him, and that if for love of Him she would consent to live a little longer,

He would hide her in His heart, and lead her thence at death to everlasting bliss.

Then she rallied for a time, ever adding fresh jewels to the bridal robe which she was preparing for the day of her heavenly nuptials. Our Lord had promised to warn her when the day of her death was really at hand, and at length He sent two angels, princes of the celestial court, to announce to her that the hour of her release was at hand. "Behold the Bridegroom cometh, go ye forth to meet Him." Then heavenly Spirits appeared, coming down from Heaven to earth, and inviting Gertrude to the joys of Paradise, singing with sweetest melody, "Come, lady, come, for the delights of Heaven await thee."<sup>1</sup> But her Divine Spouse would Himself come to fetch His bride, and entering her chamber with His Mother and many saints, martyrs, confessors, and virgins, all carrying emblems of their various triumphs, He said to her, "Arise, My sister, My Spouse, My beloved one, and I will open to thee, My inmost heart, that in My embrace thou mayest transcend the stars." These words penetrated her very soul, and broke the fetters which still bound her to earth, while her freed spirit flew to Him whom alone she had loved and served, where the heavenly harpers hush their thrilling harmony and listen silently, and where burning seraphs droop their wings in rapture ineffable.

About forty years after St. Gertrude's death the monastery of Helfta was invaded by the soldiers of Albert of Brunswick, the unworthy Bishop of Halberstadt, and set on fire. It was not completely destroyed, but, owing to the unsettled state of the country, it was

<sup>1</sup> From the Office of St. Gertrude's Feast.

deemed more prudent for the nuns to dwell in future nearer to the town of Eisleben. They therefore built the monastery of New Helfta, but retained possession of their old home, leaving undisturbed, it is supposed, the graves of their Sisters,<sup>†</sup> and probably hoping to return when peace was fully restored. But this was never considered safe for them to attempt, and two centuries after, at the time of the so-called Reformation, the peasants in 1525, incited by the heretics, burned the valuable archives, and the building was gradually suffered to fall into decay. In a second rising of the peasants in the same year, or the following one, the monastery of New Helfta was partially burnt, and the Religious dispersed to find shelter where they could.

In 1869 the Benedictines of the Perpetual Adoration, from Osnabruck, bought the half-ruined Abbey, and were enthusiastically welcomed by the whole population, both Catholic and Protestant, but they had scarcely begun the work of restoration when they were expelled from Germany by the iniquitous May Laws.

St. Gertrude's feast was extended to the universal Church in the seventeenth century. The King of Spain asked and obtained that she should be declared Patroness of the West Indies; in Peru her feast is celebrated with extraordinary splendour, while in New Mexico a town was built in her honour which bears her name. The veneration in which her memory has always been held is attested by the writings of many Saints and holy persons, who cannot speak too highly of her holiness, of her writings, and of her work in the Church. Finally, in our own day, Father Faber expresses a wish which finds an echo in every Benedic-

<sup>†</sup> No trace remains now of the site of these graves.

tine heart, that "Gertrude could be in the Church once more what she was in ages past, the Doctress and the Prophetess of the interior life, like Deborah who sat beneath her palm-tree on Mount Ephraim uttering her canticles and judging Israel."





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